

## **Tending the Flame**

### 150 Years of Liberal Religion in Kansas City

All Souls is a survivor. The 150-year history of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church is a cycle of ups and downs, of boom and bust. This is the story of people who overcame tornado, fire, national economic depression, controversy and rogue ministers.

It was never dull.

Twice in our history, Sunday services became so popular that they were moved to lecture halls that could accommodate the huge crowds. At two other times the congregation was forced into rented rooms because they could no longer afford the upkeep on their building.

All Souls has had four church buildings and 23 ministers in its 150 years. Several ministers served for between 10 to 23 years, a few lasted only a matter of months.

This is a story of resilience, determination and of brave Unitarians who dared to do what it takes to start again.

### **The Founders**

All Souls was a child of the frontier. Nine families, that we know of, founded the first Unitarian congregation here on June 2, 1868. Kansas City was only 15 years old – not much more than a frontier town really. It covered only a few blocks along the riverbank, with muddy streets and wooden sidewalks when the Unitarian Society of the City of Kansas in Missouri, as it was then called, was begun.

It is said that the early Unitarians chose the term “society” because “church” sounded “too Romish.” Theologically, the Unitarian Society espoused a Bible-based religion although without creed or doctrine, as was the norm in Unitarian churches at the time.

American Unitarianism was still young itself in 1868. Unitarians had split from Congregational churches during the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825, only 43 years before the founding of the Kansas City congregation.

No membership rolls exist for the earliest congregations. A tornado in 1885 saw to that, but we do have some history compiled years later from memories and family records.

The early Unitarians that we do know about were the families of business and professional men, and civic leaders. They were the well-to-do members of Kansas City society. They were educated people who had come west to make their way on the new frontier.

Most were Union Army veterans and abolitionists. It was a time of sharp divides, just three years after the end of the Civil War in the border city of a slave state. The community was reeling from the bloody battles that it had taken to end slavery. Jesse James, just next door in Clay County, was only two years into his 16-year crime spree.

Kansas City was entering its boom years. During the decade of all Souls' founding, the city's population shot up 600 percent, from 4,418 in 1860 to 32,260 in 1870. Such growth was largely because of the opening here of the first railroad bridge across the Missouri River in 1869, making the city, which was already a major river port, the rail hub of the frontier.

Such rapid growth was not always decorous. In 1873, a Catholic priest described in a letter what he found here: "Gamblers flash their diamonds and monopolize a good share of the sidewalks on the west side of Main Street from 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Streets. Saloons run wide open day and night." Most men carried a gun. The blocks from Third to Fifth on Main were known as "Battle Row" because of the large number of street fights there.

It seems particularly ambitious to have started a church in a town that had opened its first public school only the year before.

Three men are generally credited with forming the new church: Major Henry A. White, Alfred Pirtle and Edmund K. Rugg.

White, a New Englander and a Union veteran, came to Kansas City at the close of the war. At first he worked in real estate and was a justice of the peace, but he made his mark as an educator. He was elected to the school board in 1873, resigning in 1875 as board president to become a school principal, a title he carried until he retired because of ill health in 1895. He died the following year.

Pirtle was from a prominent Unitarian family in Louisville, Ky. He also was a Union veteran and was in the insurance business. He returned to Louisville just a few years after founding the church. Rugg came to Kansas City from Massachusetts. He was a banker. He remained in Kansas City and served as treasurer of the Unitarian Society for many years.

Although not a founder, one of the most prominent of the early members and no doubt the best known today was a Pennsylvania Quaker named Kersey Coates. He studied law and had been a teacher but when he came to Kansas City in 1854 it was as a land speculator. Most famously, he bought land on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River to develop Quality Hill, the first upscale neighborhood in the city. Also among his varied business dealings was the Coates House, the most prestigious hotel of its time. After a catastrophic fire in 1978, it was rebuilt and still stands at 10th and Broadway, although it is no longer used as a hotel.

But above all else, Coates and his wife Sarah were staunch abolitionists. They were deeply involved in the dangerous business of the Free State Movement before the Civil War, assisting anti-slavery settlers traveling into the Kansas Territory. During the war, he served the North as a colonel in the Missouri Militia while the property that was to become his hotel was used as a stable for the Union Cavalry.

Sarah was a social activist in her own right. She was a friend of Susan B. Anthony and for several years she led the local Women's Suffrage Club. She served on many boards and helped organize a group that became the Missouri Federation of Women's Clubs.

According to a 1943 history of All Souls by longtime member Dr. Allen C. Austin, when Kersey Coates died in 1887, "At the request of the colored men and women of the community, who loved and admired Mr. Coates because of a quarter century of helpfulness by him extended to them, they were granted the privilege by the Coates family of carrying the coffin from the residence to the grave."

### **First Church; First Minister**

The first minister of what was to become All Souls was the Rev. William Ellery Copeland. We know he wasn't here long but we don't know exactly how long. We do know that the church welcomed its second minister in 1871, so Copeland could have been in Kansas City only two or three years at most. And we don't know why he left.

We do know that he came here as a lifelong Unitarian and a believer in what was called the Social Gospel, the idea that religion involves social action. He held onto these beliefs through many pastorates, finally retiring as an avowed Socialist living in what today we would call a commune.

In 1868, he was just 30 years old. He came from a Unitarian family and was named for the iconic Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing. Copeland was a Union Army veteran and a recent graduate, 1864, of the Harvard Theological School. He had been mentored in his education and his ministry by a man often described as a Unitarian giant, the Rev. Edward Everett Hale, a noted Boston pastor and author most widely known for his short story, "The Man Without a Country," published in 1863 in support of the Union during the Civil War. Hale lived and preached the Social Gospel. He and young Copeland worked long hours among Boston's poor — mostly laborers, immigrants.

Copeland's first church was in Maine. He was there just four years. Stories say that his belief in temperance put him at odds with his congregation. From there he came to Kansas City.

After Kansas City, he was in Emporia, Kan., briefly and then Omaha, Nebr., more successfully. He left the Midwest and served a number of churches in the Pacific Northwest finally retiring at age 60 because of serious ill health. He and his family moved to Burley, Wash., which is described as a Socialist community on the southern

Puget Sound. But Copeland never stopped lecturing and publishing in Socialist and free thought periodicals. He died while working in his garden in Burley at age 66.

That first Kansas City congregation had met in rented rooms. They completed construction of their own church building in 1871, the same year that Copeland left.

A family in Boston had donated the \$5,000 needed to buy the property and build the church, probably through the office of the American Unitarian Association Missions. No pictures of it, that we know of, still exist but it has been described as a brown frame building with a very steep roof that had been difficult to erect. The entrance was off a covered porch on the west side of the building. The building was on two lots on the east side of what is now Baltimore between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Streets. Those who remember the former downtown Macy's will be able to locate the space as the back door of that busy department store. Baltimore was neither paved nor graded at the time the Unitarians called it home, leaving the church to sit atop a steep, often muddy hill. Today the block is high-rise office buildings and parking garages but in 1871 the neighborhood was residential. The city extended south from the river only as far as 16<sup>th</sup> Street.

Copeland was followed by the Rev. C. E. Webster and membership in the young church grew. Webster established a Sunday School that drew between 60 and 75 children each week and began a number of well-attended community activities including monthly Friday night dances in hotels and empty buildings around town. They were a big part of the city's social scene.

Mary L. McCarty, a young girl at the time, remembered those dances fondly. In 1925, she wrote a history of the church including her reminiscences of the early years. She wrote that those dances were attended by Unitarians and non-Unitarians alike.

"After the first dancing teacher appeared in Kansas City and the boys and girls learned to dance, they also began to attend," she wrote. Young Mary, whose family was not Unitarian, started going to the dances when she was about 14. "Sometimes I would be invited to stay all night with a Unitarian classmate and go to the dance with the family," she wrote.

It was an auspicious beginning but after Webster's departure the pulpit was filled by several short-term pastors about whom little is known except their names and the fact that membership declined. They were a Rev. Messiner, the Rev. Enoch Powell and the Rev. W.S. King. During this time the church not only struggled with a national economic depression but also with friction between liberal and conservative segments of the congregation.

The downward trend was reversed during the ministry of the Rev. David N. Utter, who became pastor in 1877. The personable minister stayed six years, to 1883, and was remembered for successfully establishing a number of church programs, especially for young people.

## **The Western Controversy**

The next decade may well be the most eventful in the church's history: a new name, a new building, a new minister and a major theological controversy that led to a new covenant.

First on the agenda was a new building. After 12 years in their church on Baltimore, the congregation wanted larger accommodations. Col. Coates offered to trade vacant land he owned near his hotel between Broadway and Washington for the Baltimore site. The new church would be at 413-17 Tenth St. where Coates' Pond, a popular skating spot, had been filled in.

Four years later, a new brick structure stood ready at a cost of \$25,000. It seated 500 people and was described in a local newspaper after its dedication: "The ceiling is colored a grayish green, the side walls a cool gray tint. The exposed girders and buttresses are painted in shades of brown. A good pipe organ ornaments one corner. The acoustics of the auditorium were shown by the services yesterday to be excellent."

The organ was indeed fine. It was an 800-pipe, 22-stop organ and was renowned for its "beautiful, mellow tone." It cost the church \$1,200 and stayed with the congregation until it was destroyed in a church fire in 1951.

But construction of that second church building, completed in 1887, had been arduous. The foundation had to be excavated twice because of drainage problems. Then in 1885, when the building was almost ready for occupancy – pews, carpets and pipe organ ready to be installed – a major tornado ripped through the city taking the roof of the new building with it. No church records from before the tornado survive.

During this time, the pulpit was filled briefly by the Rev. John W. Savage. He was followed by the Rev. Robert Laird Collier, who served the church from 1883 to 1887. Collier was described as "an exceptionally scholarly, gracious and eloquent British Unitarian."

While All Souls was dealing with construction problems, the American Unitarian Association had problems of its own. The decades-old discussion of just how Christian a Unitarian church had to be, flared into sometimes fiery debate. Some influential ministers in the AUA's Western Conference, which encompassed roughly the states from Ohio west, were pushing to end the requirement that all churches must be Bible based. Known as "the Unity men," they were led by the Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, AUA Western Conference secretary and editor of a weekly publication called Unity.

The Unity men wanted equal acceptance of teachings based on ethical principles, "intellectual freedom in the quest for truth." They emphasized moral integrity and human service. No uniform doctrine was required.

The opposition (the Christian side) embraced the status quo. They rejected the inclusion of the ideas of the free thinkers and liberals, insisting that all Unitarian churches must remain firmly based on Biblical teachings. They wanted Unitarianism fixed within Christian doctrine and terminology.

The dispute, known as the Western Controversy, nearly split the Association and is generally considered to be the spearhead that eventually resulted in the acceptance of the Unity position and a broader definition of Unitarianism in America.

And All Souls was in the thick of it.

A Kansas City lawyer named Judge George W. McCrary, who was outspoken in his defense of the Theist/Christian view, was a driving force in the Kansas City congregation. He was a man of national prominence. He had been secretary of war under President Rutherford B. Hayes and was later a circuit court judge. He came to Kansas City as an attorney for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad.

He was active in Western Conference affairs and was an ally of the Rev. Jabez Sunderland, an AUA official and leader of the Christian position. McCrary was named president of the Western Unitarian Association, a splinter group formed in a failed attempt to wrest control of the Western Conference from the Unity men.

McCrary wrote extensively in Unitarian periodicals supporting the Christian position. "We must stand for something besides freedom of inquiry. We must stand for faith in God as against Atheism and for faith in immortality as against Agnosticism," he wrote.

During this time he was instrumental in changing the name of the congregation to All Souls, usually regarded as an acknowledgement of Biblical leanings.

And McCrary, along with the All Souls minister Robert Collier, wrote the church's new covenant, adopted in 1885. The covenant made it clear that All Souls was a Christian/Theist congregation.

It read:

*We, the undersigned, unite as members of the Unitarian Church, known as All Souls Church of Kansas City, Missouri.*

*By thus uniting, we desire to promote the public worship of God, and the practice of the precepts of Christianity.*

*We hereby pledge ourselves to employ our individual and united efforts to attain to, and encourage, right and noble living; and to this end, to establish and maintain Sunday Schools, charitable and literary institutions, and all other agencies calculated to promote true Christian life, and thereby the advancement of the highest good of society.*

*We unite for the promotion of these objects, without requiring of each other any creed or confession of faith, and we claim no right to exclude any one from this church on account of difference in doctrinal opinions.*

*All persons signing this covenant shall be regarded as members of All Souls Church.*

Judge McCrary's role in filling the All Souls pulpit allowed him to reinforce his Theist/Christian bias at All Souls. As a member of the church board and chairman of the committee formed to find a new minister, he was instrumental in the choice. And to give the sermon at the installation of that choice was his friend and leader of the Theist/Christian partisans, the Rev. Jabez Sunderland, leaving no doubt which position was expected from All Souls' new minister, the Rev. John Emerson Roberts.

But, if Judge McCrary believed he had chosen a conservative to fill the All Souls pulpit, he was to be proven very wrong.

## The Roberts Years

The installation of Roberts and dedication of the new building were celebrated on the same day, Oct. 16, 1887, with much pomp and ceremony. Enthusiasm was running high as Roberts began what was to become 10 years in the new All Souls pulpit. And he did indeed take the church to stunning new heights, but also to a new, nearly disastrous, low.

Roberts was already known in Kansas City, where he had served as pastor of the First Baptist Church a few years earlier. His preaching, however, became too liberal for his Baptist congregation and he was dismissed. He left the Baptists altogether and was accepted into fellowship by the American Unitarian Association. He first took a pulpit in Michigan, where he served briefly before coming back to Kansas City.

At first, the All Souls congregation flourished in its new building with its eloquent new pastor. Roberts drew many to the church and there was talk of expanding the building. The church was described as a lively place with artistic and entertaining evenings furnished by the "Merry Unitarian Maidens," a Christmas bazaar and fund-raising dinners served in a downtown building. The Women's Alliance thrived. Membership rolls represented a Who's Who of Kansas City society and the pews overflowed.

But despite such great attendance, funds were no longer forthcoming. Bills were not paid and the church went into debt. This was no doubt partly because of the National Panic of 1893, which saw banks close and real estate values plummet.

Inconvenience was also an issue. The desirable residential area of the city, which was home to many pledging members, had moved south taking those members with it. Such a distance was a problem in those days of horse-and-buggy transportation. And many newcomers drawn by Roberts' increasingly liberal oratory did not feel a financial loyalty to the church.

In addition to these outside factors, trouble within the church also played a part. Roberts' sermons had become more and more liberal and his anti-Christian rhetoric led to disputes with the more conservative trustees, even though the most adamant of them, Judge McCrary, had died in 1890.

Roberts' brand of freethinking had been greatly influenced by orator and writer Robert Ingersoll. Roberts' message, in the words of Ellen Roberts Young, his great-

granddaughter and biographer, was different from the other free thinkers of his time, who abandoned faith for reason. Roberts, she said, offered a way to maintain faith but to place it in divine nature and in progress, using religious language in denouncing orthodox religion.

In 1892, the newspaper in neighboring Lexington, Mo., described Roberts as “a most dangerous man” for depriving people of the comfort of God’s message. A Kansas City paper, on the other hand, suggested with pride that he was making the city a “national center for agnosticism.”

If Roberts had been brought into the church on the Theist side of the Western Controversy, his preaching was, by now, decidedly in line with the Ethical position, which had established a firm dominance in the Western Conference and acceptance by the AUA.

After 10 years at All Souls, Roberts resigned in 1897 to found an independent church of his own, which he named The Church of This World, taking with him some 350 of the membership of 500. He preached at a theater across the street from his former pulpit. Roberts continued publishing and preaching in Kansas City to ever-smaller audiences until his retirement in 1930 at age 76.

The 150 members who had remained with All Souls faced some “dark and struggling days,” wrote Mary L. McCarty in her church history in 1924. She described the pain of those who remained: They were “the ones who craved something more than just a lecture in an opera house on Sunday morning – the ones who still wished to be known as Unitarians and to maintain the church and Sunday school and other church activities.”

### **Another new start**

What was left of the congregation could not financially keep up the building. They rented it to the Christian Scientists for a year while they returned to the practice of the church founders, meeting in rented rooms wherever they could find them. They borrowed a minister from Topeka. The Rev. W.G. Todd, pastor of the Unitarian church there, came to conduct services when he could and helped to maintain the congregation’s spirits. By the next year, the Unitarians were able to move back into their home.

A reunified church was established on a theological compromise between the Theist and Unity positions. It took as its covenant the conciliatory language of the 1894 National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches preamble.

It accepted “the religion of Jesus” but also “declares that nothing in this constitution is to be construed as an authoritative test; and we cordially invite to our working fellowship any who, while differing from us in belief, are in general sympathy with our spirit and our practical aims.”

Also in 1898, All Souls called a minister of its own, the Rev. George W. Stone, who for a brief time returned the church to stability. He was able to enlarge the congregation and church programs.

By 1900, the church had succeeded in raising enough money to pay off its \$10,000 mortgage. A friend of Stone's offered to donate half the debt if members would raise the other half. The \$5,000 was raised: one quarter of it from church members and three-quarters from another anonymous friend of All Souls.

Once All Souls was again on an even keel, Stone resigned to return to his former position as a field representative of the American Unitarian Association and All Souls slipped into another disastrous decline.

The Rev. William H. Ramsey followed Stone, serving from 1900 to 1902. During those two years the membership fell back, funds dwindled, the building needed repairs that the church could not afford. It once again was rented out — this time to the U.S. Army 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment for use as an armory. And All Souls members returned to cramped rental rooms for the second time.

### **Newcomers Save the Day**

The disastrous flood of 1903, however, actually brought good fortune to the now small congregation. The Booth Oyster Co., whose West Bottoms location had been flooded out, offered to buy the church property for \$12,000 to relocate its operation. Although a net loss on their church home of 19 years, which had cost \$25,000 to build, All Souls did get just enough money to consider rebuilding once again.

The congregation was disheartened, however, and seriously considered cutting its losses and disbanding.

This time the impetus to move forward came from a couple of strangers, newcomers to town, Unitarians who were looking for a church. In 1904, John D. and Elinor C. Stevens were distraught to find a sign on the Unitarian church they had hoped to attend: "For Sale by A.W. Childs." They tracked down the remaining members of the congregation and their infectious enthusiasm convinced what was left of the congregation to chart a future. The Stevenses remained very active at All Souls for the next decade.

The rejuvenated congregation called the forceful and energetic Rev. Charles Ferguson as its minister in 1904. He was remembered locally as a colorful character. He became well known around town as a flamboyant dresser. He reportedly cut quite a figure in a wide-brimmed black Fedora, tilted back on the side of his head and an unbuttoned black Prince Albert coat flapping in the breeze.

But he had earned a national reputation with the publication in 1899 of *The Religion of Democracy*, which brought the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman into the mainstream of the Progressive Era.

While Emerson and Whitman wrote of this religion in generalities, Ferguson took on the challenge of giving the "religion of democracy" a coherent set of beliefs. The idea

behind this philosophy is that all human beings are equal and are created as responsible, capable, active agents. It seeks to enable people to flourish as they live together, accepting human differences as the norm.

A prolific writer, he published a number of other books, two of them written while he was in Kansas City. They are *The University Militant* and a journal called the *Newsbook*. Later, he wrote on social-economic reform: *The Affirmative Intellect*, *The Great News* and *The Revolution Absolute*. Several of his books, including *The Religion of Democracy*, are still available.

Ferguson's assistant minister was his wife, Georgia Ransom Ferguson. She had been a lay reader in the Episcopal Church, in which her husband had been ordained before they became Unitarians. After studying a year at Meadville, she was ordained by her husband at All Souls and served with him the five years they were in Kansas City.

When they left, she served The People's Church in Washington, D.C. A socialist, she was active in the National Federation of Labor, the National Woman's Suffrage Association and the National Commission of Unemployed.

Charles Ferguson left the ministry, but carried on his writing as an editorial writer for the Hearst newspapers in New York City, although he commuted on weekends to Washington to act as co-pastor with his wife at The People's Church.

He then served as an envoy in Europe for the Department of Commerce under President Woodrow Wilson and in a number of civil service positions with the Department of State. His government career did not go well. He worked for a while in the private sector with an efficiency expert but died penniless in New York in 1944.

During the Fergusons' tenure, the congregation of All Souls built its third church. They moved farther south, following the population to a fashionable residential neighborhood. It was at 3425 Baltimore, near Armour Boulevard. A stone and frame, half-timbered structure, "It was a little jewel of a church. Its beamed ceilings and bench pews identified with New England," as it was described years later by a member of the congregation. The building was dedicated on Feb. 8, 1906 and served the congregation for the next 45 years, until 1951 when it was destroyed by fire.

The Fergusons were followed by the Rev. V.M. Cady in 1909, who was described as an eloquent speaker but very independent. There was a great deal of discord in the congregation and membership once again fell dramatically – by half.

Cady left in 1911 and, once again, the Unitarians were without a minister and short of funds. Largely at the urging of the Women's Alliance, it is reported, the church decided to look outside the denomination for someone to fill its pulpit. They chose Prof. Jay William Hudson from the philosophy department of the University of Missouri, who for three years came in from Columbia to lecture on Sundays. Hudson published a number of nonfiction books and articles in his field and a few years after he left All Souls, he wrote a novel called "Abbe Pierre" about a wise and genial Catholic priest who has retired to his hometown in the Gascony region of France.

The church began to grow again and when Hudson left in 1914 it was able to call a minister, the Rev. Paul Dansingburg, who was very well liked but developed health problems and left three years later. Membership had fallen to barely a handful of

families. The number of pledging members wasn't even a third of the 150 who had remained after Roberts left in 1897.

## The Birkhead Years

After Dansingburg left, All Souls entered a new boom period and once again flirted with disaster.

In 1917, the church called the Rev. Leon M. Birkhead. He remained until 1939, making him the church's longest serving minister. Birkhead had begun his clerical career as a Methodist minister but his preaching had proved too liberal for that denomination and he resigned in 1915. He was accepted into fellowship by the American Unitarian Association and after two successful years in a Wichita Unitarian church, he came to All Souls.

Membership in All Souls under the leadership of its ambitious new pastor and his energetic wife grew rapidly. During the first half of Birkhead's 22 years here, the church flourished. The Sunday school program, which he said was "the most hopeful thing about our organization," recorded a healthy attendance of 66 children in the spring of 1922.

Birkhead was active in civic affairs, working with better government groups to install a city manager form of government and to try to overcome the influence of "Boss Tom" Pendergast.

He spoke out against those who would ban the teaching of evolution and, with his wife Agnes, he traveled to Tennessee in 1925 to aid the defense in the "Scopes monkey trial." He famously hosted Sinclair Lewis the next year when Lewis visited Kansas City to research his controversial novel about the dark side of evangelism, *Elmer Gantry*.

Birkhead urged the congregation to consider a building expansion and in the summer of 1923, construction was started on a two-story wing that included a kitchen and additional classroom space. Seating in the enlarged main auditorium was doubled to hold 600. The congregation raised \$10,000 for the project and borrowed a similar amount from the AUA.

In 1925, the church took steps to broaden its theological basis by deleting from its constitution the phrase, "We take the Bible as sufficient rule of faith and practice." The covenant printed on the face of the weekly bulletin during this period read:

*"Avowing as the sole bond of our union a serious purpose to lead pure, reverent and useful lives, we seek together Love which quickeneth Service and Truth which maketh free."*

Like Roberts a generation before, Birkhead was a gifted speaker and a showman. During his last 10 years in Kansas City, attendance at times soared beyond the number that even the new, enlarged church could hold, but attendance at his lectures and

membership in the church were two very different things. By the end of the decade contributing members in the church numbered only 70.

Trips to Germany in the 1930s had convinced Birkhead that fascism was a threat not only in Europe but to the entire world. Early on, he advocated for entering the fight against Hitler when many believed a peaceful end to the European conflict was still possible.

He became passionate on the subject and developed a large following. Birkhead's appeal went beyond traditional Unitarians. In 1933, the congregation voted to merge with the First Universalist Church of Kansas City, which had been established here in 1892. That was almost 30 years before the national merger of Unitarians and Universalists.

As in Roberts' day, Sunday morning meetings were moved out of the church. Birkhead's talks were delivered in the larger auditorium of the Madrid Theater and they had little in common with a church service. Birkhead's Sunday mornings no longer included any religious elements. The sermon was a political lecture, usually on the threat of fascism in America. Music was secular.

In the words of Lon Ray Call, a UUA representative who came to assess the situation after the 1939 departure of Birkhead, "... some years ago, the distinctiveness of the institution as a church was superseded by (an) emphasis upon it as a center for adult education."

Parish activities, he reported, consisted entirely of the Sunday lecture, a weekly dinner with a book review or lecture, and a psychology class.

Most church groups were disbanded. Only the Women's Alliance remained, which devoted itself to struggling to pay off the church's construction debts. Birkhead rejected the title of minister, preferring to be called "leader." Even the name of All Souls was unofficially changed to The Liberal Center.

Many All Souls members were alienated by the secular trend of the church. This apparently was also a concern of the national organization because, with the blessings of the president of the AUA, a group of disaffected All Souls members explored the possibility of forming a new Unitarian church. Their efforts, however, came to nothing.

As Birkhead became increasingly involved in combating the Nazi threat in the pre-war years, his pastoral work continued to suffer. In the words of Call in 1939: "I have never known a church of such prominence to be so poorly organized. Since 1936, apparently no one has joined ... During the past two years his (Birkhead's) pulpit was often occupied by other speakers because of his absence in connection with the new organization (Friends of Democracy) to which he is now giving full time."

Birkhead resigned the pulpit in 1939, moving to New York to continue the fight against fascism as the director of Friends of Democracy.

The Liberal Center was no more.

## **Religious Humanism**

It is impossible to look at the history of All Souls without a discussion of humanism, which has played such a large role.

During Birkhead's years in Kansas City, nationally what had become known as humanist thought had grown into a movement. Two Unitarian ministers, John Hassler Dietrich and Curtis Williford Reese, first explored and developed the ideas in 1917, becoming leaders of the movement during the 1920s.

Geographically, Reese in Chicago and Dietrich in Minneapolis were both part of the AUA's Western Conference, which was comprised of the states west of Ohio and had been acknowledged since the Western Controversy some 40 years before as the more liberal branch of the denomination. When Meadville Theological School was relocated from Pennsylvania to Chicago in 1926, it became central to the discussion among faculty and students of "humanism," the term coined by Reese and Dietrich to describe the idea of faith in a non-supernatural, naturalistic, non-theistic, evolving universe.

By the end of the Gilded Age and the beginning of the Great Depression, some began to see a need for a statement to articulate what religious humanism is and is not. A few of the recent Meadville graduates formed the nucleus of those who authored "A Humanist Manifesto," published in 1933. But Birkhead, well into his work at All Souls at that time, was actually the person who suggested its writing to the Rev. Raymond B. Bragg. Bragg was then secretary of the Unitarian Western Conference, president of the American Humanist Association and editor of *The New Humanist* magazine and a future minister of All Souls (1952 to 1973.)

That was just the beginning of All Souls' involvement.

The Manifesto was not a Unitarian document. The 34 signers represented several religious and philosophical groups. However 13 of the 34 were Unitarians and of those, three were at one time ministers of All Souls: Bragg, Birkhead, and the Rev. R. Lester Mondale, who was minister here from 1939 to 1952. Mondale also signed "A Humanist Manifesto II" in 1973 and "A Humanist Manifesto III" in 2003, the only person to sign all three.

Those three humanist ministers account for some 56 consecutive years of the life of All Souls — from 1917 to 1973.

Additionally, All Souls' current minister, the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, signed the most recent version of the Manifesto. She has deep humanist roots and is a former co-dean and mentor for the Humanist Institute.

Unitarian historian Charles H. Lyttle said the timing of the Manifesto was important. It was partially "prompted by the widespread havoc wrought in human faith and hope by the great depression," he said. "It sought to replace despondency and doubt of God's loving Providence by confidence in the power of human intelligence and co-operative good will to become its own Providence."

"A Humanist Manifesto" is a statement of philosophy and values that affirms the worth of life in general and of humanity in particular.

A sampling of the 15 theses:

Article I: “Religious Humanists regard the Universe as self-existing, not created;”

Article VI: “The time has passed for Theism, Deism, Modernism and the several varieties of ‘New Thought;’ “

Article VII: “The distinction between the secular and the sacred can no longer be maintained;”

Article IX: “In place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer, the Humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being;”

Article XIV: “Existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate...radical changes in methods, controls and motives must be instituted...a socialized and cooperative economic social order must be established for the goal of a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good...to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely the few.”

## **The Modern Era**

After Birkhead left, All Souls was faced with making yet another new start from nothing.

It was a church “organizationally and physically in ruin” as its new minister, the Rev. R. Lester Mondale, described the circumstances he found here. The situation was so bleak that the few remaining members in 1939 nearly decided not to try. Going on would be a daunting task. The church building had been terribly neglected. Church organizations had been disbanded. The church was broke and faced with debts it could not pay, and the stagnant economy of the Great Depression offered no reason for optimism.

All Souls even owed Birkhead back salary. Although the former minister’s lectures in the Madrid Theater had drawn some 1,500 people at their peak, attendance by the time he left averaged only 79.

The AUA sent a consultant to help the board as it worked through the possibilities, finally agreeing to “take a businessman’s chance of things getting better and call a new minister.”

Once the decision was made, the congregation returned to its church building and the name of All Souls, at first charging a fee at the door to stay financially afloat. The congregation called Mondale and once again “the church began struggling uphill,” in the words of church historian Dr. Allen C. Austin.

But this time it broke the boom and bust cycle that had plagued the congregation since its early days. This new start led to an unprecedented period of stability – almost 80 years.

Mondale, like Birkhead, was a humanist. But while Birkhead had become more and more secular, Mondale remained a religious humanist. While Roberts had lost

interest in Unitarianism, Mondale remained a loyal Unitarian, ministering to the personal and societal needs of the congregation.

Born in Minnesota, Mondale was the son of a Methodist minister. He had converted to Unitarianism while an undergraduate at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn. He also had a graduate degree in divinity from the Harvard Divinity School. Before coming to Kansas City, he served the Unitarian Church of Evanston, Ill., from 1930 to 1939.

Much of what we think of today as All Souls got its start during Mondale's tenure. Immediately upon his arrival in 1939, Mondale asked the board to approve a new covenant, a variation on the covenant written by the Rev. James Vila Blake, one of the "Ethical Men," in 1894 at the height of the Western Controversy. It embodies wholeheartedly the liberal philosophy of the Ethical partisans.

*Goodwill is the spirit of this church.  
Service is its law.  
This is our great covenant:  
to dwell together in peace,  
to seek the truth in love,  
and to help one another.*

It remains the covenant of All Souls, spoken every Sunday.

The congregation got busy rehabilitating their building: They replaced the leaking roof; did extensive plastering and painting; installed new carpets, new curtains and furnishings, and boasted a new upbeat outlook. Some disaffected members returned and a number of church organizations were reactivated. The church began to grow.

By 1943, Mondale and the reconstituted All Souls had found their footing. The church was financially sound though hardly flush, having paid off its debts, including the loan on the building. It had paid Birkhead the last \$80 owed him and purchased a parsonage for the Mondales. Average Sunday attendance had grown to 133.

Children's church school was revived and relational groups thrived: a Fortnightly Club for adults; the Time Club for young adults; the Women's Alliance; the Layman's League, and monthly all-church dinners.

It was during this period that the first woman was given membership on the Board of Trustees, although she wasn't allowed to vote. In 1941, the president of the Women's Alliance, who at the time was Mrs. Margaret B. Kemp, was given ex-officio status. It was not until the 1950s that women were fully represented in all aspects of church governance. In 1957, Mrs. Frank Baxter was elected the first woman chairman of the board.

Among the new programs initiated by Mondale was one in particular that has done much to shape the character of the current church. In 1943, the first Unitarian Forum was held. A program that has endured in much the same format, the Forum is a platform for the discussion of issues, particularly those that involve moral values in the

contemporary world. The Forum hosts guest speakers each Sunday, September through May, in the hour before Sunday morning services.

All Souls enjoyed growth and stability through the 1940s then, at 3:30 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 28, 1951, fire took it all. Starting in the basement and burning up through the roof of the auditorium, the fire destroyed the church.

According to the front-page account in the Monday Kansas City Times, the custodian Earvin Jones and his family, who lived on the second floor, barely escaped the fire.

Jones told the paper that when he awoke about 3 a.m. to care for his ill wife, he became aware of the smoke seeping into the apartment. He roused his wife's niece and her husband, who had been staying to help take care of Mrs. Jones.

"They attempted to flee by a stairway leading to the church vestibule, but because of the heat and smoke they had to return to the second floor and jump from a window to a garage roof just north of the church. Mrs. Jones slipped and fell in jumping, suffering a cut on the head and a sprained left ankle.

"The custodian ran to a nearby home, where he awoke the residents and called the fire department."

The building could not be saved but the congregation met the challenge with grace and determination as described in an open letter to the congregation from Mondale after their first Sunday in temporary quarters at the First Congregational Church:

"Would the people turn out? The answer, never once doubted by the Minister, was one of the most resounding Amens in the long history of All Souls ... the floor chairs filled, the horseshoe balcony almost entirely filled ... and everyone there with the smile that you see on the face of the person who has what it takes to be at his best when the times are the worst."

Committees were formed to investigate possibilities and in the fall, All Souls bought the S. H. Velie property, a large, classic limestone home and coach house previously owned by Stephen H. Velie, an executive with John Deere Plow Co. It sat on the triangle of land where Walnut and Warwick meet 45<sup>th</sup> Street. And so, All Souls came to be located in the neighborhood that it has called home ever since.

On the edge of the Country Club Plaza and nestled between the Kansas City Art Institute and the UMKC Conservatory of Music (where the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art now stands) it was just a block away from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and only a few blocks from the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

The property was purchased with the insurance reimbursement and a gift from a member of the congregation but a capital fund drive was needed to build.

Church services were held in the auditorium of the neighboring Art Institute. Records show an encouraging 183 people attended the first service after the purchase on Sept. 16, 1951.

Church activities, including the Sunday school, met in the remodeled Velie home, now dubbed Unitarian House, and its coach house. This arrangement continued successfully if not comfortably until the spring of 1959, while plans were made for a new building on the site.

Mondale did not remain at All Souls for this process, however. He resigned in the Spring of 1952, saying the rebuilding process was not for him.

After leaving Kansas City, Mondale worked with the Philadelphia Ethical Society seven years. He then was minister of the Birmingham, Mich., Unitarian Church three years before retiring in 1962 to his home near Fredricktown, Mo. He was very active in the Fellowship of Religious Humanists and wrote several books, two of them novels, and was a speechwriter for the 1966 and 1972 political campaigns of his half-brother, Vice President Walter F. Mondale. He died in 2003.

## **The Bragg Years**

The minister who saw All Souls through the transition to the new building proved to be a milepost in church history and a man of national reputation in the humanist movement, the Rev. Raymond B. Bragg. During his 21-year tenure, from 1952 to 1973, the church reached new heights, building on the stability it had achieved with Mondale.

During these years, All Souls built its fourth new building and grew in reputation and size to a point that it was able to split off another Unitarian congregation in the metropolitan area.

Mondale and Bragg had known each other for years. Their philosophies and theology were similar. They worked together in the humanist movement as well as the American Unitarian Association. Mondale had followed Bragg at the Evanston church, which Bragg served from 1927 to 1929.

Evanston was Bragg's first pulpit after graduating from Meadville Theological Seminary in Chicago. He spent most of the time after he left Evanston in administrative work for the AUA. He was secretary of the Western Conference, helping congregations in the Midwest navigate the difficult Depression years. Also during that time, he coordinated the drafting of A Humanist Manifesto and edited The New Humanist magazine, in which the Manifesto was published.

In 1935, he returned to the pulpit. He went to the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis, where he remained 12 years, until 1947. During World War II, he took several periods of extended leave from the Minneapolis church to work with the Unitarian Service Committee. In 1947, he left the Minneapolis pulpit to do the USC job full-time. He also served as executive vice president of the AUA.

But when the All Souls job opened up he was feeling a desire to return to the pulpit and in 1952 he came to Kansas City, which he and his wife Ilsa made their permanent home. He retired from the ministry in 1973 and died five years later.

The son of mill workers, Bragg was born in Worcester, Mass., and reared in the Congregational church. He became a Unitarian while a student at Brown University.

In his first sermon in Kansas City, Sept. 14, 1952, as reported in the Kansas City Times, Bragg said the responsibilities of the liberal minister do not end in serving his own church but extend to service to the community. "The responsibilities of the minister are not scholarly pursuits, for I know very few scholars in the ministry. The minister's

job is to relate persons to their common endeavors and common goals. I measure the religious quality of a man not by what he says but by what he does.”

And Bragg was as good as his word. He was a founder of the Kansas City chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and served as its first president. He also was a founder of the Greater Kansas City Memorial Society, now known as the Funeral Consumers Alliance, designed to “combat the ever increasing commercialism attached to many funeral arrangements.” He was active with several state and local mental health agencies and a director of the Missouri State Association for Mental Health. He taught philosophy classes at the Art Institute.

During this period the church was involved in the liberalization of abortion laws, in civil rights and voter registration, and in the repeal of Missouri blue laws.

Bragg’s public positions and those of the church did not go unnoticed during the politically charged 1960s. Bragg was singled out by the Minutemen, a paramilitary group established by a member of the ultra-conservative John Birch Society.

In 1964, Bragg wrote a friend that for the past year he had been the recipient of harassing late-night phone calls and that the church had been picketed a half-dozen times by the Minutemen, “whenever there seems to be a discussion of human relations in the broadest sense.” His life was threatened at least once.

Bragg said he had discussed the possibility of bringing legal action but believed nothing should be done. For one thing, he said, “I could not establish personal damages because my congregation regards these successive attacks as a badge of honor.”

Beloved for his eloquent, thoughtful sermons and subtle humor, Bragg drew more members to the church than could be well served.

Despite the difficulties implicit in operating a church out of an old house and rental space, it was by all accounts a busy, vital congregation. It supported a burgeoning Sunday school and an adult religious education program, three women’s organizations, a men’s group, a group for adults, one for young adults, and one for teens, a theater group, and, of course, the Forum.

Membership was nearing 400 in 1959 when All Souls settled on a plan to raze the Velie house and begin construction on the new, modern brick church that is home today.

Getting to that decision had not been an easy process. For eight years, successive boards had worked with five architectural firms and raised \$162,000 in pledges in an effort to align needs, wants and available funds.

Originally, it was thought to add an auditorium to the Unitarian House but the final plan called for demolition and an all-new church building, a building that “looked like a church.” The final plan was one that Bragg deemed would “give the beholder a sense of serenity and power.”

On April 18, 1959, the church hosted a “Housewreckers’ Hop” party followed by a “house bashing” to close down Unitarian House for demolition. The first service in the new building was Feb. 14 of the following year. The sermon was “Here is the New Building. Now What?”

One new element was an art gallery in the lobby. Bragg asked Blanche Carstenson, who was an artist, to find artwork for the walls. Bragg pointed out that the

congregation was used to being surrounded by art while meeting at the Art Institute and was going to miss it. The gallery showcases the work of a different area artist each month and is reputed to be the oldest non-museum art gallery in Kansas City.

With membership at 470, the building was too small on the day it opened. Church School classes had to be held in neighboring buildings: Children's classes met at the Art Institute and adult newcomers classes were at the UMKC Conservatory of Music across 45<sup>th</sup> Street.

The church immediately started planning for an education wing, under the adept guidance of Board Chairman Earl F. Winn Jr., for whom it was later named in gratitude for his work and leadership. Ground was broken on June 15, 1962 for construction at a cost of \$117,000. It was opened the next year and dedicated May 5, 1963.

The two-story education wing provided much-needed space for classrooms, meeting rooms and a small kitchen. The community room was furnished with a stage and dressing room for productions by the Coach House Players community theater group, which had grown up during the years of Unitarian House.

The community room was named in recognition of Dr. C.C. and Mrs. Perla Petty Conover, who contributed generously to the church over the years including a \$25,000 bequest to the capital campaign for the educational wing. He was an area physician for more than 50 years and a member of All Souls from before 1905 until his death in 1962. He was a member of the board for many years. She was an active member of the church from 1910 until her death in 1970.

The new library was named for Grace Hill, a librarian and a woman who loved books. A 30-year member of All Souls, she bequeathed \$10,000 to the church at her death in 1960 to be used for a library.

With additional space, many new programs were added. Still space was at a premium and the staff small.

Nationally the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961. Bragg, however, was not in favor of the move and it was not until 1993 that All Souls voted to officially add the second U to its name, despite the 1933 merger of All Souls with the local Universalist church.

The decade of the 1960s was a period of growth for the Unitarian Universalist Association. All Souls, with the adept Ray Bragg in the pulpit, mirrored that trajectory, going from 470 members in 1961 to 781 in 1967.

The Sunday School was bursting at the seams with 551 children enrolled and a full-time RE director was hired to supervise some 80 volunteers. All Souls was the largest church in the Prairie States District and the largest UU church in Missouri. Even with the new addition, rental space continued to be needed for classrooms.

All Souls had seen periods of great growth before but this time, instead of continuing an untenable build-up and the inevitable crash, Bragg and the church leadership saw an opportunity to expand Unitarianism in the area.

In 1961, when All Souls membership topped 500 for the first time since 1895, Bragg told the congregation that by the year 1968 when the church marked its centennial

year, “we ought to be commemorating the opening of the second Unitarian church in Kansas City.”

And that is just what happened. All Souls celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1968 with an exhibit at the Kansas City Historical Society; commemorative medallions designed by sculptor and long-time member Elizabeth Powers; guest speakers, and a celebratory poem by Virginia Scott Miner, a poet on the faculty of Pembroke Country Day School and a member of the congregation.

... and the opening the following year of a second Unitarian church here.

A study group from the congregation had recommended starting the new church in suburban Johnson County, Kan., where the population of the metropolitan area and the church was rapidly growing. In 1969, some 85 All Souls families who lived in Johnson County took the leap to found the Shawnee Mission Unitarian Church.

At the time, Bragg predicted that the new congregation would grow to match All Souls in size without becoming a drain on anticipated All Souls membership. And that has proved to be the case although his hoped-for membership of 500 each proved a bit optimistic.

It had been hoped that a third Unitarian church eventually would be established, this one on the northeast side of the metro, but this was not to be. Growth in Unitarianism slowed nationally and All Souls was no exception to the trend, stabilizing at about 450 by the time Bragg retired in 1973.

Although retired, the Braggs were given the use of the parsonage for their lifetimes and both remained active in the church as long as health permitted.

Bragg’s imprint on the church remains strong.

He was given minister emeritus status and the auditorium was named for him. The congregation established a Ray Bragg Appreciation Day in May to “pay tribute to the ideas and ideals with which Ray Bragg has enriched the church on the theme of Reason, Religion, Society.” This observance was continued annually and expanded with the joint sponsorship of other organizations, including the American Humanist Association, into a national symposium and award program, continuing into the 1980s.

Bragg died Feb. 25, 1979. He was memorialized at a service at All Souls attended by some 375 people and his ashes spread on the grounds of the church. At the service, the senior ministers of All Souls and the Shawnee Mission Unitarian Church read a selection of his sermons and he was eulogized by long-time friend and fellow humanist Khoren Arisian of the Ethical Culture Society of New York. Bragg’s family planted a maple tree at the northeast corner of the church property in his honor.

A bronze bust of Bragg by sculptor and church member Elizabeth Powers was donated to the church by her family. It stands at the entrance of the auditorium that bears his name.

Bragg’s papers came to the church and have been archived in the State Historical Society of Missouri, which has an office at the University of Missouri at Kansas City.

And as a memorial, a photoengraving of Bragg with the aspiration that he used in each service was installed on the wall of Bragg auditorium. The aspiration reads:

“When there is a better chance for manhood and womanhood, a freer air, a grander openness, a fuller personal initiative; when there is more laughter and freedom and fine, spontaneous humanity, then, indeed, there will be priceless gain.”

## After Bragg

Ray Bragg was a hard act to follow. In the years after his retirement, All Souls remained relatively stable although there were some bumps in the road. Membership never reached what it had been at the height of Bragg’s ministry in the 1960s, before the establishment of the Shawnee Mission church, but it held at between 300 and 500 through the first 25 years after he left the pulpit.

The congregation and its ministers remained active in a variety of social justice issues and maintained a high profile in the community. During this period, the endowment fund was established and Simpson House was added to All Souls’ property.

The first minister in the All Souls pulpit after Bragg was the Rev. Richard C. Myers, who came in the fall of 1973. Myers, 29, had been the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of North Easton, Mass. He had a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Pennsylvania State University and a bachelor of divinity degree from Harvard University. He had done post-graduate work at the Clinical Institute of Religion and Mental Health in Boston.

Myers was president of the Greater Kansas City Memorial Society and the church was involved in activities of the Westport Cooperative Mission.

It was during this time that All Souls took a very public stand in what was to become long-term support for the LGBTQ community by renting space to the Metropolitan Community Church, a nondenominational Christian congregation that had been denied space by the other Christian churches of Kansas City because of its gay and lesbian membership.

In 1975, the endowment fund was established, finally providing a much-needed financial cushion for the church. Despite the tremendous strides made through the Mondale and Bragg years to rebuild the church, financially All Souls had been barely surviving month to month. The board often took small bank loans to meet the budget. During a couple of years, board members had made personal loans to the church to cover operating expenses.

During Myers’ time, membership was stable with more than 400 voting members but there was dissension in the leadership and Myers left after just three years.

He was followed in 1977 by the Rev. Don Vaughn, who stayed seven years. A Texan, Vaughn was born in Fort Worth and attended McMurry College in Abilene, Texas. He graduated from the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He left Texas to serve UU churches in Medfield, Mass., Wichita, Kan., and Baltimore, Md.

Vaughn was installed in November of 1977 in a service that combined his installation with a commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bragg's ordination. Paul Carnes, UUA president, spoke and Shawnee Mission UU Church was invited.

The next year, the church said goodbye to one of its longest-tenured staff members. Executive Secretary Alice Massey, who had begun work at the church in 1958, retired. She had started as a part-time secretary and became full time in 1967. With 20 years of overseeing the day-to-day operations of All Souls and handling reporting duties for the board, her tenure was longer than that of most All Souls ministers. In gratitude, the board voted her a small pension, which was unusual at the time.

During Vaughn's stay, the church remained strong and the membership stable. The church day was extended on Sundays to include meals and popular activities after the service. A number of the programs that are very familiar today were begun during this period: the Caring Committee; Christmas Yulebocks, and the Coming of Age curriculum for youth.

The pipe organ that had served the congregation in good times and in bad since 1886 had been destroyed by the fire in 1951. At first the congregation used a Hammond electric organ to provide music for services. But in 1982, the family of William G. Denney made fine music possible once again by donating a Steinway grand piano for Bragg auditorium. The electric organ was sold to buy a synthesizer, speakers, a mixer and electronic rhythm system.

Like his predecessor, Vaughn was active with the Westport Cooperative Mission and worked with the Kansas City Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights. He served on the boards of Planned Parenthood and the ACLU.

All Souls also worked closely with the Shawnee Mission church to establish the Greater Kansas City Unitarian Universalist Council to further the growth of the UUA in the area.

Vaughn's tenure came to an abrupt end in 1984 when it was learned that he was having what some considered an inappropriate personal relationship. He said in resigning: "My personal life and my professional life have unfortunately impinged on each other to the disadvantage of the church and to the impairment of my effectiveness as your minister."

Despite the internal disruption, the church made a major expansion that year. It bought the house next door, now generally referred to throughout the city as "Simpson House." It is a 3-story, cut limestone residence built in 1909. Standing next to the church on Walnut, it was built for Burnett Simpson, a successful local attorney. Bragg had hoped to buy the property from Simpson's widow during his time at All Souls but they could not agree on a price. When Mrs. Simpson died she left the right of first refusal to the church, which was eager to have the space and bought the property in 1984 for \$151,000.

The house needed a great deal of repair and renovation, much of it done by volunteers, but it has become a welcome space for occasional meetings and special occasions. It also is available for rent to the community at large providing income to the

church. The house and garden make up a popular venue for weddings, family celebrations and receptions.

Its beautiful yard serves as a memorial garden for All Souls members. The grounds on the south side of the house were dedicated in 2002 as a memory garden. A book is kept in which occasions that are celebrated there are recorded. In 2005, a stone memorial tablet was installed at the entrance containing the names of those whose ashes have been scattered on church grounds.

The centerpiece of the space is a 7-foot, stainless steel sculpture titled “Connections” by Verne Schafer. It was donated in 2004 in memory of longtime member Ed Powers.

After two years of interim ministers, the congregation called the Rev. Judith Walker-Riggs in 1986. She was from Melrose, Mass., and had served churches in Massachusetts, Iowa and Virginia. She had studied at the Harris Manchester College Library, Oxford, United Kingdom.

A gifted speaker and able administrator, she emphasized welcoming diversity of belief. Membership once again rallied. Attendance averaged 200 at Sunday services with almost 100 children in RE. Services were added in the summer months at Simpson House, which unlike Bragg Auditorium had air conditioning, and there was discussion of a possible second Sunday service.

Walker-Riggs spoke out strongly on human rights legislation at the local and state levels and she served on the Kansas City School Desegregation Monitoring Committee, the National Interreligious Commission on Civil Rights and was vice president of the local chapter of Planned Parenthood. The church took some pride in the fact that she was arrested for protesting nuclear testing on the day after she was given an honorary doctorate from Meadville Lombard Theological School in 1988.

During this time, the congregation addressed the growing problem of homelessness in the city through Westport Community Services, the Hunger Group and Habitat for Humanity. The church also worked on joint programs with a sister church in the inner city, Ward Chapel AME.

A strong gay and lesbian group was begun and in 1991 All Souls was designated by the UUA as a Welcoming Congregation, recognizing its “notable effort to reach out to the LGBT community.”

In 1990, congregational interests ventured overseas. After the fall of the USSR, the UUA began pairing American UU churches with Unitarian churches in Romania. All Souls became the sister church of the Unitarian church in Galfalva, Romania, a relationship that has included some seven visits, the first in 1991, and a continuing relationship of more than 25 years to date.

In 1991, Walker-Riggs resigned, leaving a growing congregation with a membership of about 425 people involved in 44 committees and affiliated groups. She took the ministry of a Unitarian church in London.

After a period of interim ministers, the congregation called the Rev. Dr. John H. Weston in 1993. His tenure started out on a high note as All Souls celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a program by former senior ministers Mondale and Vaughn, and

Sunday sermons by the Rev. Carolyn Owen-Towle, a candidate for UUA president. But his time in Kansas City ended in bitterness and conflict resolution.

Weston was a graduate of Dartmouth College with a PhD from Columbia University. He had a Masters degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a Masters of Divinity degree from Meadville Lombard Theological School. Before coming to Kansas City he was in community ministry in Chicago.

Both he and the congregation were active in public affairs. In the first year a new Social Justice Committee was formed supporting gay rights and reproductive choice and opposing efforts to legalize concealed carry in Kansas. Weston was involved with Clergy United for Justice, The Bioethics Consortium, Planned Parenthood and the ethics committees of hospitals for the mentally ill and terminally ill.

All Souls began a working relationship with reStart emergency shelter and transitional living center in 1993 that continued for more than two decades. Also that year, the name of UUs for Lesbian and Gay Rights was changed to Interweave, an active organization at All Souls through the struggle for marriage equality.

It was in 1997 that the Gaia Community, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, began holding rituals on Sunday afternoons at All Souls, which sponsored the new earth-based, pagan congregation.

During this period the church could celebrate financial good health. For the first time in memory, it had an operating reserve and the endowment fund hit the \$1 million mark. The congregation took on a capital improvement campaign, raising \$700,000 to renovate Bragg and the lobby, to reroof the RE wing, make needed repairs on the west wall of Bragg and purchase 290 new chairs to replace the folding metal chairs that had been used in Bragg. The kitchen was moved to a larger space near the community room and an area was made available for the book shop, replacing the kiosk that had been dragged out to the lobby Sunday mornings.

Now air conditioned, All Souls became a year-round church in 1997 holding services and religious education classes every Sunday. Religious Odysseys, in which individual members of the congregation tell the story of their personal journeys, were added to the summer program. They meet in the hour before the Sunday service that is allotted to the Forum September through May.

But despite all this progress, interpersonal relationships within the congregation were at a low. Weston, in 1996, outlined two problems as he saw them: 1) Some see the minister as unresponsive and 2) the stress of the building program has brought out a fractiousness within the congregation.

It was indeed a contentious period while the congregation was deciding whether to renovate the building or to move. Pledges – and membership – dropped off dramatically.

Emotions ran so high that All Souls brought in UUA consultants to help identify problems and begin the process of resolution and reconciliation. Through a series of sometimes painful discussions, people began to learn to listen to one another and to disagree without acrimony. Weston compared the consultants' work to a root canal – “a relative rather than an absolute good.”

Through this painful process, the congregation learned some much-needed lessons that would prove necessary in the coming years. Nonetheless, Weston left All Souls in 1998. Membership had fallen to just over 300. RE enrollment was down to 63. He was followed by what many describe as the very fruitful interim ministry of the Rev. Charlotte Shivvers preparing the congregation to call the Rev. Jim Eller in 1999.

## **Breakthrough Congregation**

Eller was a graduate of the University of Oregon with a master of divinity from Starr King School for the Ministry. He had served as minister of the UU church of Peoria, Ill., Hope Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Okla., and the UU congregation of Tahlequah, Okla. Theologically, he described himself as a religious liberal and practicing pluralist.

When Eller began his ministry at All Souls, the congregation had already identified a determination to work together and look to the future. In 2000, the congregation agreed to take the next step and form a task force on intentional growth. In the years since its all-time high membership of 700 in 1966, All Souls had maintained a reasonably stable membership but one that never exceeded about 450.

And their plan worked. In 2007, All Souls was honored at General Assembly as a Breakthrough Congregation, a recognition of congregations that have achieved and sustained significant numerical growth. In that year, the church boasted a membership of 528 members with 112 children and youth in RE.

This growth was facilitated by the UUA in 2003 when it chose the Kansas City metro area for a pilot marketing campaign. The \$200,000 campaign included billboards, and radio and TV ads.

The campaign was successful in drawing visitors to All Souls but to bring those visitors into membership the church needed to take action. It hired a full-time credentialed assistant minister of religious education, a full-time director of membership and a part-time assistant minister. A second Sunday morning service was added.

Eller also began a ministerial intern program at All Souls for seminary students making the church a teaching congregation. The first intern was Melissa Mummert. She was followed by Megan Conrad, Mitra Rahnema and Kent McKusick. Additionally, Eller and the congregation mentored two seminary students: Jill Jarvis, who became the Southern Cluster outreach minister and then senior minister at the Lawrence, Kan., UU church, and Davinia Gabriel. The church also, for a time, was affiliated with a community minister, the Rev. Kathy Riegelman.

The current All Souls senior minister, the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons, who had a practice of mentoring interns before she came to All Souls, continued the program here. As of this writing in 2020, she has had three interns in Kansas City: Shawna Foster, Jordinn Nelson Long and Rebecca Gant, bringing the total to eight at All Souls.

The congregation during Eller's tenure was still primarily humanist, but he encouraged welcoming a diversity of thought into the discussion and urged a tolerance for new ideas.

Community outreach and social justice flourished during this period. In 2004, the Social Responsibility Board was established to coordinate almost a dozen justice-related activity groups.

A partnership with Bethel AME, a predominantly African American church in the inner city, was developed even as All Souls maintained its support of the Ward Chapel AME soup kitchen. Eller and a number of the congregation were active in the Metropolitan Organization for Racial and Economic Equity. The church sent a delegation to New Orleans to aid in the clean-up after the disastrous Hurricane Katrina. Work continued with reStart and Harvesters, Westport Cooperative Services and Harmony House, among others.

During this period, the Green Sanctuary Committee was established. A spring plant sale was begun to support the Community Gardens program and the east side of the building was landscaped as a native plant demonstration garden.

Eller and the church were involved with support of independent, noncommercial community radio station KKFI, which in 2008 began broadcasting the weekly UU Forum presentations. The church was honored in 2009 by the Missouri Association for Social Welfare for its "outstanding community and public service."

A marriage equality banner was affixed to the side of the building to proclaim the church's support of the LGBTQ community. And in 2009, the church hosted the UU conference, "Allies for Racial Equality."

Once again the congregation began exploring the idea of enlarging the building and revived the possibility of establishing a third UU church in Kansas City but before a decision was reached, Eller announced his retirement.

After 10 years at All Souls, Eller left in 2009 with the title of minister emeritus.

Things did not go smoothly after his departure. The interim minister, the Rev. Lee Devoe, was not a good match for the congregation. After the first year of her two-year contract she was asked to leave.

During that year, the membership director had been fired, committees were dissolved and the congregation once again became contentious. Once again, loyalty to the church declined and membership fell to about 350.

And, once again, a UUA consultant was brought in to help identify problems and rebuild. Disaster was averted when the Rev. Jennifer Brooks took the job of transitional minister.

Brooks concentrated her efforts on implementing solutions to the identified problems, developing patterns of respectful communication, building leadership and stabilizing the congregation for the next step of calling a settled minister. In 2012 the congregation said a reluctant good-bye to Brooks' warm personal style and clear, effective leadership.

In its next settled minister, All Souls returned to its humanist tradition to call the Rev. Dr. Kendyl Gibbons. She is the fourth minister of All Souls to have signed a

Humanist Manifesto. In 2015, Gibbons was the recipient of the UUA's Religious Humanist of the Year Award.

She is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and a lifelong humanist. She is a past president of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. She is a 1976 graduate of the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va., with bachelor degrees in religion and sociology. She has a master's degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a doctorate of ministry from the Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago.

She served as minister of the DuPage Unitarian Universalist Church in Naperville, Ill., 15 years, and came to Kansas City from 14 years at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, where Bragg had been pastor from 1935 to 1947.

And so, All Souls once again began a rebuilding program that will no doubt be part of the story of today's church as it will be written 50 years from now, in 2068, for our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

**For additional information on church programs or for a copy of *Tending the Flame*, which contains additional material, contact: [jones.kayc@gmail.com](mailto:jones.kayc@gmail.com) or [jgreebz@yahoo.com](mailto:jgreebz@yahoo.com)**

