

**A BRIEF HISTORY  
Of The  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH IN CHERRY HILL**

In the early 1950s, twenty-five or thirty families who lived in South Jersey regularly crossed the Delaware River to attend the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia. For social and study purposes these South Jersey families were organized into a neighborhood group. They studied the Sophia Fahs books to learn her philosophy of teaching children, and they had much conversation and much coffee.

By 1956 these New Jersey families were discussing the pros and cons of becoming a Unitarian fellowship, and on May 11, 27 people signed the Membership Book. The group applied for fellowship status in the American Unitarian Association, and on May 25, the AUA approved the application, and the Unitarian Fellowship of Southern New Jersey was established.

The first efforts of the new fellowship were to conduct a Vacation Church School which was held for two weeks in the Haddonfield home of Chris and Mary Sherer. Some 48 children and 12 adults participated.

Other people were attracted to the new Unitarian fellowship and a central meeting place for members from Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties was needed. The Community Center in Merchantville became the first home for the group.

On September 23, 1956 the **Reverend Edward Collier**, a retired Unitarian minister, preached the first service of the new fellowship. He continued to serve on a once-a-month basis for the next two years.

In November 1956 the first issue of the *South Jersey Unitarian*, the church newsletter, was published.

By December 1956 there were 62 members in the Fellowship, and the Merchantville Community Center was becoming too small for the expanding congregation.

In January of 1958 the Fellowship began to search for a full-time minister. Clyde Davis chaired a Search Committee which presented the **Reverend Edwin A. Lane** to the congregation, and in June, at a Congregational Meeting, Reverend Lane was called. He began his ministry to the South Jersey Fellowship in September, 1958.

By the following January the membership had grown so much that the Fellowship applied to the UUA for church status. This application was approved in February 1959.

Because the Merchantville Community Center was now too small for its needs, the new church looked for land on which to build. In April 1959, a five-acre tract, on which Fellowship Hall now stands, was purchased in Delaware Township (now Cherry Hill). In September, an adjoining seven-acre tract, on which Unitarian House stands, was purchased.

Construction of Fellowship Hall and the Religious Education Building was begun in September 1961, and both buildings were dedicated in October 1962, with Dr. Harlow Shapley giving the main address. At this time the membership stood at 213 active members.

During the eight-year ministry of Edwin A. Lane the church became known in the area for its adult education program. Lecture series, dramatic productions, musical programs and an annual art exhibit drew interest from people in the community. The children's education was also a major concern of the church, and a part-time Religious Education Director was employed.

In January 1967, Edwin Lane resigned to accept the pulpit of the Unitarian Church in Westport, CT. He preached his last sermon in April 1967. In September the Pulpit Committee presented the **Reverend Keith Munson** of the Andover, MA church as its candidate. He was accepted by the congregation in October, and he began his services in Cherry Hill in February 1968.

During Keith Munson's seven years as minister there were many achievements. The church grounds, which were developed under the guidance of landscape architect member Ken Arnold, were accepted into membership by the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta. Lib/Lib, a singles group which was open to the community at large, was established. A program of Extended Families was begun in May 1977. Also a Memorial Fund, a Long Range Planning Committee, and a Ministerial Relations Committee were set up. In a very difficult time in the church's history Reverend Munson's resignation was requested. He left in April 1975

At a Congregational Meeting in June 1976, the members refinanced the church debt in order to retire the bonds and to establish a capital expense fund and also voted to call **Reverend Margaret D. Wallace**, a graduate of the Boston Theological Institute, who had been ordained at the Main Line Unitarian Church in 1975, as our third minister. During her time with us, Reverend Wallace arranged for the three candidates for UUA presidency—Jack Mendelsohn, Bucky McKeeman and Paul Carnes—to visit Cherry Hill to speak to our members before the 1978 election. Margaret Wallace submitted her resignation, as requested, in July 1978. For the next three years lay leaders and guest ministers led the Sunday services and the various committees handled church business. Because the church did not grow during this period, we applied to the UUA for an extension minister to be with us for a three-year period to help us to revitalize the church. In April 1981 the congregation approved of the **Reverend Alice Blair Wesley** to serve as a part-time interim minister.

Reverend Wesley began to serve the church in September 1981. She devoted far more than her two days a week to our church. She helped us to cope with difficult and unexpected problems. In January 1982 the Administration Building was destroyed by fire and Reverend Wesley encouraged us to rebuild immediately. Member architects Bill Rebbeck and Bob Hill designed a building which was dedicated in June 1984. The building was paid for in three years by almost every pledging unit giving an extra hundred dollars yearly for three years. Under Reverend Wesley's guidance, the committees became active and church membership increased; and during her third year with us, we began to search for a full-time, permanent minister.

The **Reverend Rudolph Nemser**, who had been the minister of the Schenectady, NY church, became our minister in September 1984. Mr. Nemser was a strong leader. In addition to his Sunday sermons, pastoral visits, work with the committees of the church and with community groups and the Joseph Priestley District, Mr. Nemser taught two philosophy classes, and he counseled individuals at their request.

In 1990, the UU Association assigned us Szekelyderzs in Romania as our sister church. From that time, Mr. Nemser made yearly trips to Szekelyderzs along with small groups of church members. We provided the village with a sunflower press, computers, and the young children with daily fruit. 3

Susan Rak joined us as DRE in 1990. She worked at strengthening interfaith efforts through South Jersey Regional Equity and the Tri County Congregational Organizing project (youth work). Reverend Morel Ensminger's Jazz Funeral and Mardi Gras services were very popular. In the summer and fall of 2006 concerns were raised, and a fall 2006 congregational vote was held with a 57% vote of confidence in Reverend Morel Ensminger's ministry. She left in May 2007.

In 1996, Unitarian House, which dated from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was completely remodeled as part of a building campaign. The rebuilt building included offices installed on the first floor, the Horsch Room redecorated for meetings, and a bright and cheery caretaker's apartment on the second floor. Church members were involved in all phases of the reconstruction.

Around that time, a traumatic event in the church's history occurred on February 3, 1997, when fire destroyed Fellowship Hall. Church members, supported and encouraged by Rev. Nemser, created the *Building Our Dream* campaign for rebuilding the church. The monumental effort raised more than \$1.1 million from members, supplemented by a UUA loan and proceeds from the fire insurance policy. The dedication of the new building took place in May 2002.

At the same time, our social justice committee was able to find resources to extend help to two African American churches destroyed by arson in 1997.

Rev. Nemser announced his retirement at the end of December 2000, and was given the status of Minister Emeritus by the congregation. The **Reverend Vanessa Southern** served as interim minister for six months and Reverend Carol Taylor guided the congregation during the search for a new settled minister. In April 2002, the congregation called the **Reverend Melanie Morel-Sullivan** (who later married and became Melanie Morel-Ensminger).

Rev. Morel -Ensminger was instrumental in developing a small-group ministry program ("fellowship groups") in our congregation, and she encouraged our commitment to social justice—particularly racial justice and marriage equity. She worked at strengthening interfaith efforts through South Jersey Regional Equity and the Tri County Congregational Organizing project (youth work). Reverend Morel Ensminger's Jazz Funeral and Mardi Gras services were very popular. In the summer and fall of 2006 concerns were raised, and a fall 2006 congregational vote was held with a 57% vote of confidence in Reverend Morel Ensminger's ministry. She left in May 2007

The **Reverend Walter Braman** arrived for a two-year term as interim minister in September 2007. Under his leadership, we have developed new mission and vision statements and continue to work to strengthen leadership development and volunteer commitment.

In April 2009 we called the **Reverend Manish Mishra**, who arrived in Sept 2009 to start an exciting new ministry with us, one of spiritual deepening and growth.

###