

# *Under One Roof*

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**The Unitarian Church in Summit**

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Forty years ago, the Unitarian Church in Summit stood at a crossroad. Its church school program was attracting hundreds of children, who were meeting in the basement of this building, in the two little rooms off the balcony, in the basement of Community House, in the attic of Community House and just about anywhere else space could be found. It was crowded, it was confining, and it was becoming intolerable. The church -- at least as I understand the story -- took a bold step. They sold the Parker D. King House, the next house to us on Waldron Avenue, and purchased a mansion on the corner of Whittredge and Summit avenues as a location for a new religious education facility.

It was a not-ideal solution to an intractable problem. Now the religious education program would be located a long block away from the church. The mansion itself was not in the best of repair, and it had never been designed for the uses the church envisioned. And it was not large enough. But the church had an exciting vision for the future. They would add a social hall and a classroom wing and sometime in the near term, they would relocate the church from Springfield and Waldron to the larger site and wed it to the religious education facility.

If you have been around for any length of time, you know what happened. The social hall and the classroom wing were built, the rooms in the old house were renovated and the church school moved in. But the church remained here, on this site. And then began a precipitate decline in the size of the church school. At the same time, the congregation, dissatisfied with its divided program, began decades of casting about for a solution to the problems created by having its operations housed on two different sites. Reluctant to invest money in a building which was never seen as more than a stopgap, the congregation allowed the old house to deteriorate. And as it sank into worse and worse condition, many of us tried our very best not to think of it. Our vision of our church was this building, and unless we taught in the church school or attended an evening program, when shadows and candlelight disguised stark reality, we seldom visited Unitarian House. If my memory serves me, when I pre-candidated for this pulpit almost 11 years ago, the committee showed me this building with great pride and walked me through Community House, but only drove me past Unitarian House.

As it turned out, I was called to be the minister of the congregation, and before long, I was joining others in wondering just what those people were thinking, all those years ago, when they bought that property and saddled us with a permanent division in our program and an old building which was, or seemed to be, a bottomless money sink. I want to take this moment to say a good word for the generation who, 40 years ago, made that decision. Theirs was a bold and creative vision. They could see their church, its steeple

commanding the heights above the town center, welcoming people to the community, and offering an expansive and efficient and attractive religious home. They could not know the demographic and governmental and economic changes which would wreck their dreams. They chose well, on the basis of the information they had, they invested their resources, and they left us a legacy. They said that it was unacceptable to house our children in basements and attics and rooms the size of walk-in closets. They said our program, our church, our life as a religious community must have facilities which will serve our vision of who we are and what we are about. And within the limits of their resources, they did the best they could to realize that vision.

In many ways, we are the beneficiaries of their dreams and their work. Over the years we have been challenged to find creative ways to turn our problems into opportunities. For a while, church offices were located in Unitarian House; for a while, most committee meetings were held there; we have used the building to house the homeless several weeks every year; we have used it annually for our garage sale; we have used it for social gatherings and Renaissance fairs and picnics; we have made it available to Alcoholics Anonymous, and to denominational gatherings, and to bridge clubs and community groups and preschools and the youth symphony. We have diligently sought to make it an asset for us and for the community. And we have been largely successful. But the more we succeeded, the more the building deteriorated -- especially the old house, which was never intended for the heavy uses to which we were putting it. And with every passing day, it became clearer that we were nearing the time when we would have to decide what to do with this legacy.

And then we had the good fortune to hire Carol Haag to direct our program of religious education. And the church school began to grow again. From 50 or so enrolled, and a smaller average attendance, the church school enrollment reached upward to 200 children in two sessions. The program, heavily dependent upon the volunteer efforts of parents and other adults, soon required a staff of 30 or more adults each Sunday. And then we began to notice an unintended consequence of a strong and vital religious education program. We were building two quite separate and distinct communities -- the community centered on this building and its services of worship, and the community centered on Unitarian House and its program for children.

Before long, many of us who were members of the congregation and strongly committed to its ideals simply did not know each other; there was no easy way to integrate the two central elements of our congregation. Many of us down here did not know the children of our own congregation; as one of the parents said to me, the children of the church school were so separated from the adult program that they couldn't pick the parish ministers out of a lineup. The informal sharing and interaction so essential to a worshiping community simply could not happen because of our geography. And as the church grew and the church school grew, we realized that despite all the property we owned, we were often short of usable space.

And then we were drawn back again to the bold vision of 40 years ago -- the vision of finding a way to bring our community together, under one roof, in facilities which would

be adequate and appropriate to our needs. Deep within many of us was a hunger for the opportunities such a solution to our problem would offer. We dreamed of a coffee hour that teachers and parents and all members of the congregation could attend. We dreamed of a space where we could gather for social events. We dreamed of a nursery close enough that young parents could leave their infants with confidence and peace of mind. We dreamed of a situation which would allow our children to experience some portion of our life as a worshiping community and feel themselves part of the larger church family and experience the music and rich spiritual life of the congregation, which would allow the rest of us to be invigorated and renewed by the presence of the children. We dreamed of facilities which would encourage us to know each other, to see ourselves reflected in each others' eyes, to build relationships which would sustain us through good times and bad, laughter and tears, successes and failures.

In short order, we found ourselves exploring a series of options and alternatives which would make this dream a reality. We revived the old scheme about moving the building and found we could not do it. We considered abandoning this building for a new sanctuary up the street. We talked about exchanging properties with a nearby church. None of the alternatives proved viable. And at last, we settled upon a counterintuitive plan to unite the congregation on this site -- a plan which most of you have seen and which a supermajority of the congregation adopted at a congregational meeting. Now we are in the crucial phase of this project -- to determine whether we have the courage and the generosity of spirit to follow the example of our forebears 40 years ago, to provide the financial support needed to make our dream and all its attendant benefits a reality.

I want to speak to you candidly this morning about why we need to support this plan as generously as possible. So there will be no confusion, let me lay to rest one misconception. This challenge we are confronting is only superficially about bricks and mortar. We've been talking about buildings and facilities, but the heart of the issue is something else entirely. The challenge we are confronting is about who we are and who we are going to be as a community of faith. The fact is that this building campaign is about creating the infrastructure necessary to maintain and expand our ministry to ourselves, to our community, to the world.

Sometimes we like to think that buildings do not really matter; sometimes we argue that given all the problems in the world, we ought not lavish resources on physical facilities; sometimes we insist that the physical nature of our surroundings ought not affect our spiritual lives. But the fact is that the context in which we function not only expresses what we value, but affects what we will attempt, what we will allow ourselves to dream. Imagine, if you will, that great Flentrop organ set up in a gymnasium, or in a revival tent. Do you imagine that it would have the same ability to stir the soul in some other setting? Think about a dozen children forced to sit around a table for an hour and listen, without any opportunity to move around and interact and get to know each other and the teachers. Do you honestly imagine that what they learn is unaffected by the setting and the method of teaching? Think about the consequences of having to say to community groups that there is no room for them in our facilities, that the upper floors of Unitarian House are unusable and too costly to heat, and that despite our best efforts, we cannot be certain the

furnace will be working in the other rooms or the roof won't leak. Do you honestly believe that lack of facilities does not affect our ability to reach out to the larger world?

Think about what it means to design a program which almost guarantees that the most committed and dedicated and involved members of our community will seldom meet, will not share the same experiences, will not be able to know each other in any real way. Do you honestly believe that this will not hinder our ability to respond to each other in times of crisis and sorrow and need? Think about the consequences of always being divided. Do you honestly believe that this fact alone does not tempt us to think of ourselves as small and weak and vulnerable and limited in what we can do and be?

Because of the geography of our property, and despite valiant efforts to overcome the problems that geography poses, we have been handicapped over the years in our efforts to build common community, to embrace our opportunities and responsibilities, to serve each other and the world fully and well. We have become a truly fine church, but we have not begun to exhaust our possibilities. That is what this building program is all about -- establishing the conditions which make it more likely that we will embrace and achieve the greatness which beckons us. This building program is about building on our strengths and passions, about continuing an enhanced outreach into the community, about creating the kind of caring community which someone has called "the blessed community," about integrating our children into the life of this congregation, that they may know they are loved and cherished and that we may see in them a glimpse of our future. And it is about creating a facility which is beautiful, efficient, embodying our vision of a church community, without draining our resources so completely that we have little energy or money left to respond to the world around us.

Is it impossible to achieve these goals without this new building? No, but given the nature of the world in which we find ourselves, it is increasingly improbable. In this world in which social, economic, cultural influences all function to undercut and hamper and block the emergence of true community, in which demands on our time and our energy leave most of our lives fragmented and distracted, a church which hopes to build the blessed community cannot afford facilities which represent yet one more series of hurdles to be overcome on the path to that goal. That is why there is so much urgency about this project at this time. This is our opportunity to fashion a building which reflects and enables our vision of religious community here at the ragged end of the 20th century. This is our opportunity to build on the legacy of the past and embody our own bold dream which will enable and challenge the next generation, the next century.

I have no doubt that there are flaws and inadequacies in our plan. I suspect that most of them are invisible to our eyes but will be only too obvious to those who inherit our work from our hands. I fully expect that 40 years from now, someone will be sitting in the building we build wondering why in the world we made some of the choices we made. That is as it should be. The world changes and all we can do is respond with the best vision and the deepest commitment of which we are capable. What I hope will not be the case 40 years from now is that a small remnant of a once-great church will be sitting

around regretting the fact that we did not seize the opportunity which lay before us and let it and our future slip away.

In case you have not already guessed, I am passionate about this plan and what it can mean to this church to be gathered under one roof, a united congregation poised to respond to the challenges and the opportunities of a new century. For most of my tenure as your minister, I have wrestled with the building problems. For most of my tenure as your minister, I have coped with the limitations they have imposed upon us. For most of my tenure as your minister, I have been frustrated by the amount of time and money and energy these aging facilities have drained away, and I have been intrigued by what we might have achieved had we been freed of that burden. For most of my tenure as your minister, I have dreamed of cutting the Gordian knot and finding a resolution of the building dilemma. And now my tenure draws to a close. In a few weeks, I shall surrender this pulpit and my position as your minister. It is my dream that part of the legacy of these past 10 years will be a clearer vision of ourselves as a religious community, and a new facility which will make that vision a reality.

My friends, this is a great church; it has a great history; it has shown great perseverance and persistence and creativity and determination. But I know that greater things await this church. The demands upon it in the years ahead will not lessen; they will grow as women and men seek places where they can find refuge from virtual community in the experience of real community. We need to act now, that we may offer each other and the world a vision of that blessed community -- open, accepting, challenging, caring -- a place where we may find ourselves in each others' eyes and know that whatever we may believe about God, the sacred always emerges in the midst of human community.

Over the course of the next few weeks, you will be asked to think about what this church means to you and what it can mean to you, to your family, to the community, to the world. Over the course of the next few weeks, you will be asked to consider the legacy we shall leave for our children and our children's children. Over the course of the next few weeks, you will be asked to invest in this church and the dream of what it can be by making a three- year pledge to support the building campaign. When Beverly and I considered what our pledge should be, we looked at our resources, our income, our obligations, and agreed upon a pledge which would be challenging but which we thought we could manage. When it came time to make our pledge, we looked at each other and without discussion increased it by 20 percent. As you can imagine, we are not to be found in the upper reaches of the giving chart. We had planned to pledge \$5,000. We have pledged \$6,000 -- and if circumstances permit, we will increase that pledge. We believe in this project and its importance to the future of this institution; we care passionately about the future of the Unitarian Church in Summit. We are determined that our pledge will not be the least we can manage but will be the very most we can manage. I ask you to make the same kind of commitment. This is the time when your decision will mold the future and structure the possible and shape a legacy.

Forty years ago, men and women in this church committed themselves to a future. They created a legacy which has sustained us and challenged us and frustrated us for all the

intervening years, a legacy which now will play a significant role in helping us fund the dream which lures a new generation. Now is our time to build a legacy of our own for the generations which will follow us. I pray we will not have less courage, less commitment, less vision, less generosity than those who preceded us in this place, in this faith. We owe it to those who preceded us and to those who follow us; we owe it to the community, to ourselves, to our children and our children's children.