

UUFR History Highlights 1999 to 2024, by Bob Fitzgerald

As the 1990s came to a close, UUFR was in a state of transition. Lead minister Rev. Morris Hudgins had resigned and left for a new position in Ohio. The Congregation had finished its first strategic plan and was in the process of beginning to implement it. The top priority of the plan was to expand the main building and create a new sanctuary, and the Congregation had voted to do so. An interim minister, Michael Boblett, arrived to serve as minister and brought new energy to the church while a search for a new settled minister was ongoing. In March 1999, a Building Council was created and charged with developing a comprehensive land use plan for the campus and creating a larger more spiritual space for the Congregation. In August 1999, Rev. Julie Denny Hughes arrived to serve as UUFR's new Minister.

The five year period between 1999 and 2004 was a time of high interest and involvement on the part of the Congregation. Louis Cherry was selected as the principal architect for the building project in May 2000. His original conceptual design inspired the Congregation. In April 2001, a capital campaign was launched to raise \$1.2 million dollars for a building expansion and new sanctuary. Discussions about design features in the building, cost of the project, and how various groups would be accommodated were sometimes heated but remained civil and compromises were worked out to most members satisfaction. By Congregational votes the architect was hired and authorized to prepare schematic drawings, later to complete design and construction drawings, and finally to approve the final design and authorize the construction contract. All three of these votes were approved by over 85% of those attending.

In August 2002, Construction Drawings were completed, and bids were solicited from three contractors. All were higher than expected and a process of making changes to reduce costs began and continued for several months. The most significant change was suggested by Construction Committee Chair John Manifold, who proposed a reconfiguration of first floor modifications that required much less new construction. In August 2003, ground was broken, and construction began. In August 2004 it was completed sufficiently to allow the first service in the new sanctuary. Later, a generous grant from TJ District Chalice Lighters paid for the cork floor in the sanctuary. As remaining construction was coming to an end, UUFR was poised for growth and a greater presence in Raleigh.

On Saturday, January 8, 2005, the wooden serpentine wall was installed, completing the adopted sanctuary plan. On Sunday, January 9, 2005, UUFR dedicated the building expansion and new sanctuary. Gini Courter UUA Moderator delivered the keynote address.

Unfortunately, a couple of months prior to the first service in the new sanctuary, Rev. Hughes resigned as Lead Minister, and the church was left without a Minister just as it was expecting to see an influx of potential new members. In addition, the Board of Directors had informed UUA that UUFR desired two years of interim ministers.

UUA accommodated this request, providing two ministers, each of whom served the church for a year. Both ministers were rather low key caretakers, providing UUFR with Sunday Services, but most other activities were carried out by existing staff along with lay leaders. According to data submitted to UUA, UUFR membership dropped from 565 to 465 between 2004 and 2006, although operating expenditures for those two years showed a slight increase. In any case, the church did not grow as hoped with the opening of the new sanctuary.

There were other factors that affected the membership and financial growth of UUFR in the years following. Both membership and financial projections made prior to the building project turned out to be optimistic. Membership, while somewhat up and down, remained fairly steady, around 500, according to data submitted to UUA. Projections had predicted a steady growth approaching 900 by the start of the next decade, and pledge payments growing to \$800,000. Actual growth was much more modest, although the pledge payment increases did allow for a gradual rise in operating expenses. However, the operating expenses included debt service payments that reduced the amount of money available to pay the salaries of the ministers and staff.

The principal thing that has made UUFR's development somewhat different than most has been turnover rate of our lead ministers. Following the departure of our first full time minister in 1998, UUFR has been served by nine lead ministers – three called ministers, four interim ministers, and two developmental-contract ministers. One characteristic among almost all of them is the lack of experience in serving a church of our size. All but the first full time minister and our current developmental minister fall into that category. This lack of readiness for serving a medium to larger size church has been problematic for both the congregation and its ministers.

Members of ministerial search committees have reported being disappointed by the number of applications and the experience level of the ministers who applied to serve UUFR. It is likely that a primary reason is that UUFR was not offering a salary high enough to attract experienced ministers. Debt service payments made it difficult to set ministerial and staff salaries at a level needed to attract experienced applicants.

The settled ministers have all struggled with staff supervision and selection, a problem often exacerbated by an inability to attract

qualified applicants due to the salary levels being offered. Serving as minister of UUFR has not been an easy job for anyone.

In spite of some of the financial and staffing problems, the church continually developed and expanded its social outreach and community services during the ministries of both Tom Rhodes and John Saxon. On a couple of occasions, large numbers of UU members from as far away as New York and Washington joined UUFR in demonstrating at HK on J Marches (Historic Thousands on Jones Street) and Rev. Barber's Moral Monday and Poor People's Campaigns. All of UUFR's leaders have encouraged and participated in a variety of charitable giving, food banks, refugee services, political action, and protests in support of good causes which other blogs related to the UUFR's 75th Anniversary will describe. Of particular importance is UUFR's membership in One Wake, an organization composed of several churches and other community groups advocating for more affordable housing in Wake County. Participation in One Wake has increased UUFR's visibility in among churches and the community at large.

Another multi-year project resulted in UUFR being designated a Green Sanctuary. It began with the sanctuary's lighting system switched to LED bulbs. Later solar panels were installed on the roof, and when heating and cooling systems needed replacement, energy efficient heat pumps were installed in Peace Hall, and the old system for Founders Hall was updated with a more efficient one.

Currently the church is in the best position it has been in memory. After much discussion following the resignation of Rev. John Saxon, the church applied for a developmental minister, a new program created by UUA to assist stressed congregations. The first one chosen by UUFR provided impressive Sunday services but failed to establish a quality work environment for the staff. He was replaced by the Reverend James Kubal-Komoto, an experienced developmental minister who has

invigorated UUFR, recruited an excellent staff, and led the church's efforts to play a larger role in the community. He will serve us until July 2026, after which UUFR will again employ a called minister.

UUFR received two large financial contributions from a donor known only as the One Heart Fund. The first one provided for the refurbishment of Peace Hall, including updating all the classrooms, remodeling the bathrooms and modernizing the large main meeting room in the building. The second contribution retired the debt owed on the new building. This has allowed UUFR to increase operating expenses, attracting more experienced staff and support some needed maintenance and repairs.

Funds from the Memorial Committee along with other UUFR sources were used to substantially upgrade the UUFR kitchen in Founders Hall.

UUFR has benefited significantly from a large bequest of over \$1.4 million to the UUFR Foundation from former member Martin Perry, who passed away in 2020. The Foundation's purpose is to provide financial support from earnings on investments of its funds to support nonoperating expenses of UUFR. This gift is the largest ever received by either the Foundation or UUFR.

Currently, UUFR has a stable slowly growing membership, and pledge drives and payments have produced slowly growing revenue. UUFR has expanded its social action activities and is gaining more attention in the community at large. A primary goal of many is to keep us on the current path and be sure of our ability in the future to recruit a lead minister who has a demonstrated ability to serve a large and growing church.

The kind of people who join UUFR and remain for long periods of time have changed little over the years and remains much the same today.

Like most UU churches it is made up of generally well educated people mostly of middle and upper middle class people who are liberal socially politically, and religiously. It is predominately white and tends to be older than the general population, although younger parents who are looking for some moral guidance for their children are also well represented.

The church serves as a place that provides a sense of community for its members, and an opportunity for outreach to the broader community through service to disadvantaged and needy groups of people through coordinated, targeted activities and contributions.