

75th Anniversary Play

Performed at UUFR, Sunday, Dec. 1, 2024

*With Mary Kate Gaughram, Em Puertolas, Tina Ostergaard, and David Ostergaard*

Child:

How old is UUFR?

Narrator:

Our congregation will be 75 years old on Saturday. It was founded on December 7, 1949.

Child:

How did it get started?



Narrator:

The first Unitarian congregations in this country were founded more than 200 years ago. Even though they were Unitarian, they were more traditionally religious than most Unitarian Universalist congregations today, and almost all of them were in New England.

Players:

We believe in the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston!



Narrator:

Then, as many Americans started to move West, Unitarian congregations were started in other parts of the country, but mostly in big cities like Chicago, St. Louis, Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco.

It was only after World War II that many Unitarian congregations started forming in smaller cities, including here in Raleigh in 1949.

Child:

What was life like in Raleigh in 1949?

Narrator:

It was a lot different...



Player 1:

Harry Truman had recently begun first full-term as president.

Player 2:

Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" and "South Pacific" had both just opened in New York City, making "Some Enchanted Evening" one of the most popular songs in the country.

Player 1:

"Hopalong Cassidy" - - television's first western - - had just begun its run on NBC for the viewing pleasure of the less than 10 percent of American families that had televisions - - which is about the same percentage, by the way, of families that had air conditioning at the time.

Player 2:

The New York Yankees were on their way to beat the Brooklyn Dodgers in the World Series that October, and closer to home the first NASCAR race had just been held in Charlotte.

Player 1:

Raleigh was a sleepy and segregated city of about 65,000 people.

Child:

But how did this congregation get started?

Narrator:

It all started at Wiley Elementary School in the Forest Park neighborhood. Several women were having a sewing meeting.

Player 1:

[Holding knitting needles] I'm an Episcopalian.

Player 2:

I'm a Unitarian.

Player 1:

Then you must meet my sister. She is also a Unitarian.

Narrator:

The Unitarian was Harriet Doar. The Episcopalian's sister was Iola Moore.



*Iola Moore*

Player:

I used to be a Unitarian someplace else, but there's no Unitarian congregation here in Raleigh!

Player:

Me too, and I miss it. We should start our own congregation!

Player:

Let's get together with our family and friends for a meeting to talk about it.



Narrator:

That year in November, they held a meeting at the Sir Walter Raleigh Hotel in Raleigh. More than a dozen people showed up, and they agreed to start a congregation together.

The small congregation was officially recognized by the American Unitarian Association on December 7, 1949.

Child:

Where did everybody meet after that?

Narrator:

At first, they met in people's homes. Then they met in rented rooms at NC State and various other places.

Player 1:

I forgot...where are we meeting this Sunday?"

Player 2:

We're meeting at the [hand movements]...Y...M...C...A!

Narrator:

Eventually, the congregation decided it needed its own place to meet. And it famously started with just a single penny.

Player 1:

I'm starting our fundraising right now by throwing this penny into this ashtray.

Narrator:

After several years of saving money, the congregation had enough money, and in 1959, the congregation bought a house at 119 Hawthorne Road.



Child:

Just a regular old house?

Narrator:

Just a regular old house! But according to the neighborhood rumor mill, the people who lived there before ran a numbers racket, so the neighbors were a little suspicious of their new Unitarian neighbors.

With their own building, the congregation kept growing, so eventually the congregation decided it needed an even bigger building.

So the congregation built Peace Hall here on Wade Avenue.

Child:

The big red building next door where the children and youth meet?



Narrator:

That's Peace Hall!



When the building was finally ready, the entire congregation had a procession- which is like a big parade- from the Hawthorne Road house to Peace Hall, carrying the congregation's most important possessions.

Peace Hall was where the congregation held its worship services every Sunday morning. That's where a lot of weddings and memorial services took place too.

Player 1:

Hi, my name is Larry.

Player 2:

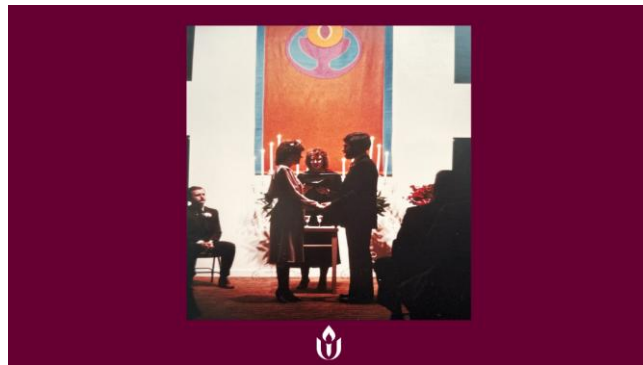
Hi, my name is Jerri.

Player 1:

You're kind of cute. And our names go together well. Wanna get married?

Player 2:

Sure!



Narrator:

Larry and Jerri Meisner had one of the first weddings in Peace Hall. Since they were youth group advisers then, the youth served as ushers for their wedding. But with another new building, the congregation kept on growing, and soon enough...

Child:

It needed an even bigger building!

Narrator:

That's right, but there was a problem...

Player 1:

We want to build a new building that's two stories, but right now, we only have enough money for one story.

Player 2:

I've got an idea. Let's build the bottom story now. Then, once we save up enough money, we'll build the second story on top of it.

Narrator:

So that's what the congregation did. First, the congregation built the lower level of this building...



Players:

[Players put a long rectangular box center stage.]

Narrator:

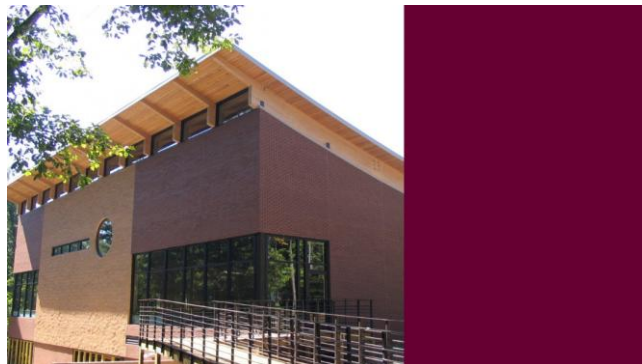
For many years, the congregation used the lower part of this building as its new sanctuary.

Child:

Where we have social hour now?

Narrator:

That's right. Then, the congregation built the upper level of this building.



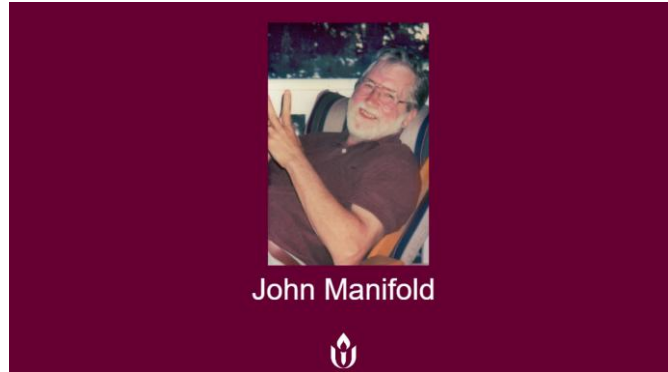
Players:

[Players put a second rectangular box with a soaring roof on top of the first box.]



Narrator:

John Manifold was a member of this congregation that helped make sure the construction went right. He spent almost everyday here at UUFR for an entire year.



Player 1:

My name is John Manifold. Hey [pointing] that wall plate is the wrong shade of beige!

Child:

When this congregation first got started, what were the worship services like? Were they the same as today?

Narrator:

At the beginning, the congregation didn't have worship services The congregation didn't even meet on Sunday mornings. Instead, it met on a weeknight.

Child:

What did people do when they got together?

Players:

Yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak! Yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak! Yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak!

Narrator:

More than anything else, Unitarians in the 1950s liked discussing things!

But Iola Moore, one of the founders, wanted something more religious, so they started having Sunday services once a month in 1956. Many Sundays, they just read mimeographed copies of sermons that ministers in other Unitarian congregations had written.

Player 1:

This guy's prose is rather purplish.

Player 2:

Yeah, it's getting all over your hands.

Narrator:

Other Sundays, people in the congregation came up with other ideas for the worship service. There was a lot of variety. Every week was different.

Player 1:

What should I put in the newsletter about this Sunday's service?

Player:

Call it "The Great Mystery." What it will be about is a mystery, but I'm sure it'll be great.

Child:

What kind of songs did the congregation sing?

Narrator:

The congregation didn't start singing hymns together until 1965, nine years after it had its first worship service!

Child:

What about lighting a chalice at the beginning of the service?

Narrator:

The congregation didn't start lighting a chalice until the 1980s.

Child:

What about the minister?

Narrator:

For 30 years, this congregation didn't have a minister. Members did everything by themselves. Eventually, some people thought the congregation needed a minister, but not everybody.

Player 1:

I think it's about time we got a minister!

Player 2:

Minister? We don't need no stinkin' minister. All they will want to do is tell the rest of us what to do, and we don't need anybody telling us what to do! Plus, we would have to pay them!

Player 1:

Well, you've gotta point there but... [dramatic death scene].

Player 2:

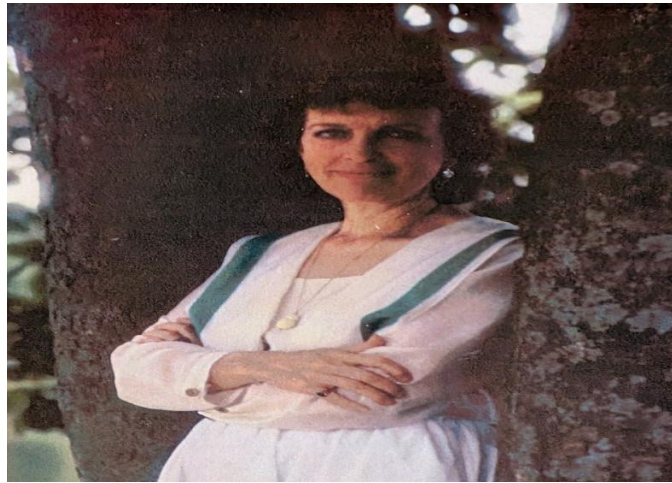
Jeesh. Who's gonna do the memorial service for this one? Maybe we do need a minister after all.

Narrator:

That's how the congregation decided to get its first minister. They didn't want somebody to lead worship services every Sunday. But they wanted somebody who could lead a memorial service when people died.

Child:

Who was the congregation's first minister?



Player 1:

[Wearing a stole] I am the Rev. Frances West, and I'll be your first minister!

Player 2:

What's that thing around your neck! You look sort of religious wearing that! I don't know if I like that.

Narrator:

Some people were happy to have a minister, but some people still weren't. They only allowed Rev. Frances to speak two times a month, and they made a rule that she couldn't wear any vestments like a robe or a stole.

Player 2:

[Player 2 takes away Francis's stole and shakes his finger at her.]

Narrator:

The congregation's first few ministers only stayed for a few years each, but in 1987, the congregation called the Rev. Morris Hudgins as its minister.

Rev. Morris was known for giving very intellectual, academic sermons...



Player 1:

[Wearing chin beard]. Today's sermon will be about the Transcendentalist Movement in the first half of the 19th century and the Transcendentalists' understanding of God...

Player 2:

[Nods off and snores loudly]

Narrator:

But it was under Rev. Morris's leadership that the congregation grew to more than 500 members for the first time.

Rev. Morris stayed with the congregation for 11 years.

After Rev. Morris, many ministers came and went, but none stayed for more than five years. They often started off well, but after a while, the congregation and the lead minister sometimes didn't get along very well.

Players:

[Player 1 warmly shakes hands and greets Player 2. Player 2 turns around. Player 1 kicks Player 2 in the butt and Player 2 stumbles away.]

Narrator:

But since Rev. James came in 2019, the board and Rev. James have been working hard to figure out how to have a good relationship and figure out how to make important decisions together.

Players:

[Looking together at Magic 8 Ball.]

Narrator:

Besides the lead minister, there have also been lots of assistant ministers, intern ministers, music directors, and other staff. Marge Link, who was our congregation's third religious education director, is still a member of UUFR today!

From its earliest days, the congregation has tried to be welcoming to all people.

When the congregation was first founded in 1949, Raleigh was still a segregated city. That meant that Black people weren't allowed to live in the same parts of the city as white people, go to the same schools, or even eat in the same restaurants. They also mostly went to different churches. This was very unfair, and many members of the new Unitarian congregation wanted things to be different, especially in their new congregation.

At one of the congregation's first meetings, the members made a very important decision.

Player 1:

My name is L.H. Jobe. I'd like to read to you part of our proposed bylaws.. "Any person may become a voting member."

Player 2:

What does "any" really mean?

Player 1:

ANY means ANY!

Player 2:

Mmmph! [turns arounds and walks away].

Narrator:

The congregation hasn't always done a perfect job of being welcoming to all people, but it's been an important ideal from the congregation's very beginning.

The congregation has also always tried to make a difference in the larger community...

Player 1:

I don't make a lot of money, and it's so hard to find an affordable place to live in Raleigh!

Player 2:

Me neither. I wish the was an affordable place to live where people of different races could live together.

Narrator:

In the 1960s, the congregation created a partnership with four other congregations - - three predominantly Black and one other predominantly white.

The congregations raised money to build the Rich Park Apartments, which provided 100 apartments to low-income individuals and families.



Starting in 1970, people of different races started to move into these apartments, and low-income people still live in these apartments today.

UUFR tried to do other things to make the world a better place too.

Player 1:

I have a gay son, and I wish there was some place where I could talk to other parents with gay children.

Player 2:

You could chat with other people online.

Player 1:

It's the 1980s. The Internet hasn't been invented yet!

Player 2:

That's true, but I heard that a chapter of PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays meets at the Unitarian congregation.



Narrator:

UUFR was one of the first two congregations in Raleigh to be welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. The congregation hosted a PFLAG chapter, made its space available to other groups, and its ministers officiated at blessing ceremonies years before same sex marriage became legal.

And just like UUFR today does a lot to help immigrants and refugees, during the 1980s it helped support a refugee family from Vietnam.

Child:

Do you think UUFR is more the same or more different after 75 years?

Narrator:

In many ways, it's very different. It used to be only about a dozen or so people. It's now more than 600 adults, youth, and children. It used to meet at the YMCA. Now it has two big building on its own campus. It used to not sing hymns or have many rituals, and now it does. It used to not have any paid staff. Now it has a minister and more than a dozen paid staff members. I'm sure it will continue to change in many ways in the future.

But some things are the same. Since its earliest days, UUFR has always tried to be welcoming to all people, make enough room for them when they showed up, and tried to make the world a better place. It always has had many committed members who were willing to dream big and work together to make their dreams for this congregation come true.

Child:

I hope that never changes, no matter how old the congregation gets.

Narrator:

Me too.

*THE END*