



# A BRIEF ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

*of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of  
Centre County (UUFCC)*

1950-2025

# Old Photos

*By Michael Bourgo (1944-2024)*

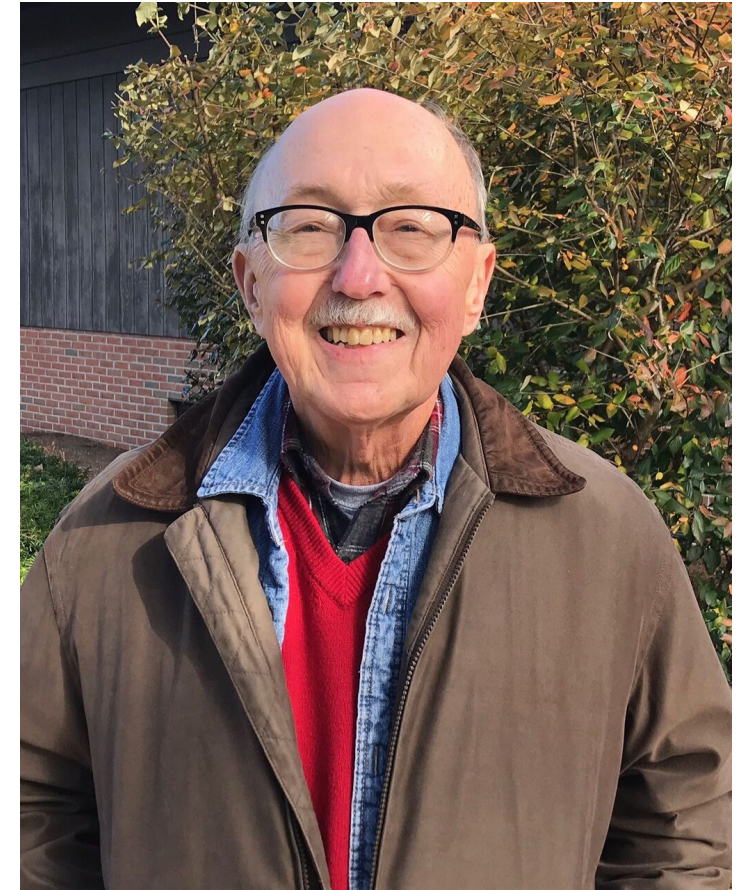
How we love to look at their faces,  
the names we say every day,  
and if these people are gone,

not so the love: it's still here,  
and if no longer palpable,  
it matters not at all;

for the length of love  
is as long as memory itself,  
and if its breadth is now imagination,

so be it. We hear the voices  
as surely as we see these faces,  
and think of afternoons,

of people we cannot live without,  
and praise be! We do not.





The Unitarian Fellowship of Centre County (later the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County or UUFCC) was founded in 1950. It was part of the American Unitarian Association's "Fellowship Movement," which offered formal recognition and assistance to small communities of religiously liberal people that operated without a minister. The Fellowship's membership book lists 15 members in 1950.

Centre County Unitarians at their first annual meeting at the State College home of Robert and Mary Oliver, April 8, 1951:

From left to right sitting or kneeling: Helen Le Baron; Mrs. Amanda Martin; non-Unitarian friend; Mrs. Mary Oliver (kneeling); non-Unitarian friend; Mrs. Margaret Warner; Ruth Peters; Robert Oliver; Mrs. Jane Schmidt; two non-Unitarian friends, man squatting and woman seated in chair; Mrs. Lydia M. Forbes, hidden by the non-Unitarian woman in chair; Ernest B. Forbes, seated at back; Oscar A. Haac, sitting on floor in front; Mrs. Inge Moser; non-Unitarian friend, the woman with spectacles; Mrs. Clare L. Haac; Mrs. Helen Moffit, behind Mrs. Haac; Russel Shadel; and Fred Warner.

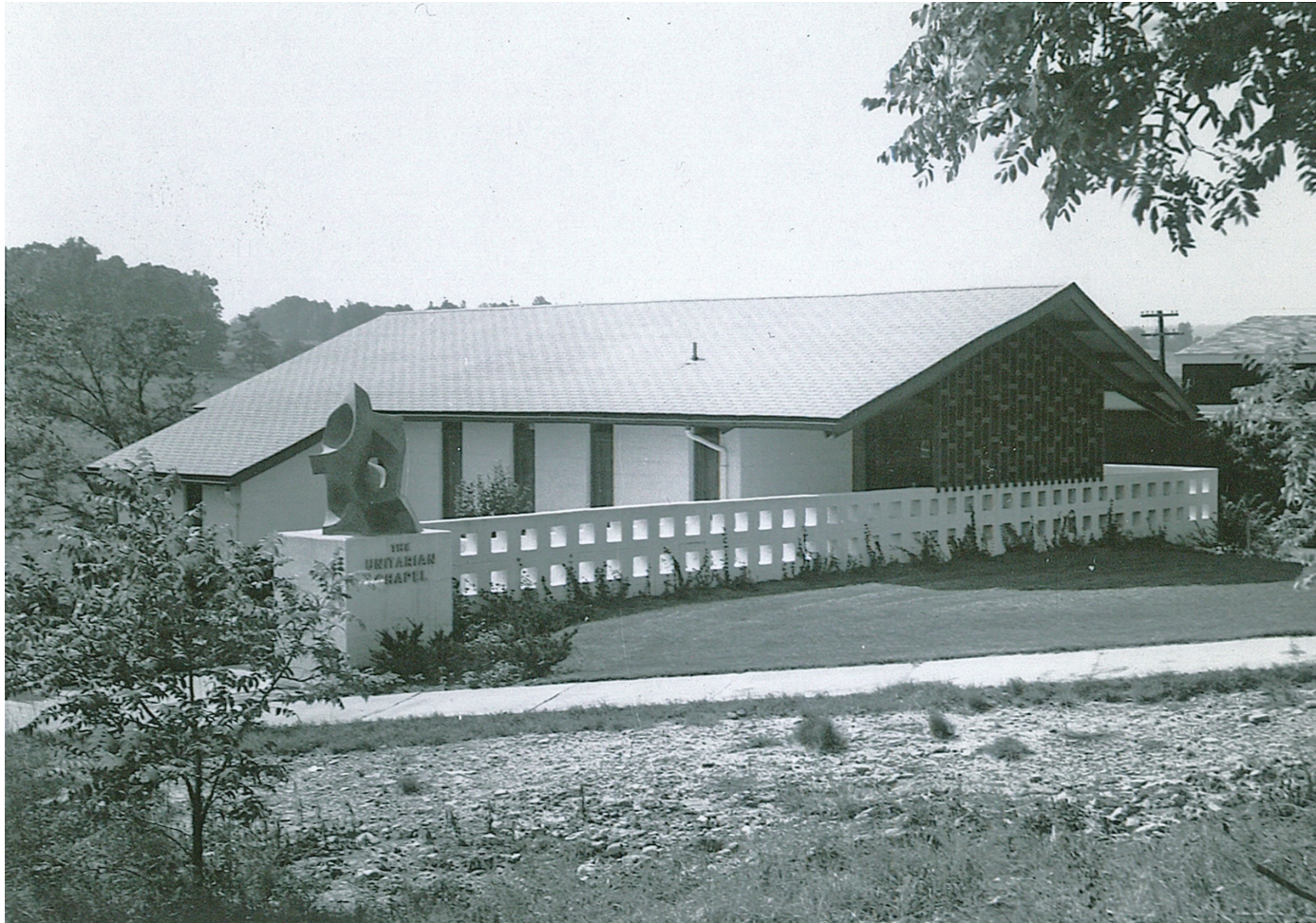
From left to right, standing: non-Unitarian friend; Gerald Moser; Mr. and Mrs. C. Gottschalk.

In the early years of the Fellowship, services were held in the homes of members. Soon the services moved to rented spaces, first to the Friends Meeting House and then to the Odd Fellows Hall.

Within ten years, those aesthetic shortcomings were addressed. The Unitarian Chapel on Glenn Road was built at a cost of \$35,000 and dedicated in 1960. In 1961 the Board of Trustees was formed.

*Right: Unitarian Chapel Interior*





*Unitarian Chapel exterior, with Francisco Cruz sculpture*

A free-form sculpture created by a Philippine graduate student in the Art Department at Penn State, Francisco Cruz, was installed outside the Chapel in 1963. It was later moved to the grounds of the Fellowship's current location on Waupelani Drive.

In 1964, responding to the large number of children in the Religious Education program, the congregation decided to construct a building on Glenn Road solely for that purpose. In 1966 it began to hold classes in the newly constructed Religious Education Building, which was two doors down from the Chapel.

In 1970, the congregation decided to move toward ministerial leadership, and in 1971 Rev. Richard Weston was called as UUFCC's first settled minister. During his tenure, UUFCC's community activism, both local and international, flourished. With members and Rev. Weston working together in shared ministry, the first day-care center in State College was opened in the RE Building in 1971. The Fellowship sponsored a project to help Vietnamese refugees settle in the State College area. Within the congregation, "Extended Families" were developed to promote community in the congregation. The first "sharings" by members of their personal beliefs and experiences became a frequent, well-loved part of Sunday Services. Regrettably, in 1976 Rev. Weston resigned because of verifiable misconduct.



*Right: Marni Politte*

In 1977 Rev. Marni Politte (later Marni Harmony) was called as the Fellowship's second settled minister. She served until 1980, when she resigned to move to a larger church in Wisconsin. Instead of calling a new minister to succeed her, the congregation voted to hire a member (Sue Smith) as a part-time Administrative Coordinator. That arrangement continued for the next several years.





The third settled minister, Virginia Knowles, was not called until 1986. In 1988 Joan Sabatino was hired as the congregation's first paid, part-time Director of Religious Education (DRE). She remained in that position for more than ten years.

*Joan Sabatino*

In the mid-1980's the congregation developed and began implementing a plan to greatly expand the Fellowship's space, consolidated in one building. Services were moved to the RE Building, and the Chapel was sold to the Islamic Society of Pennsylvania in early 1987. In early 1988 a building committee was formed. Subsequently, the congregation held a successful capital campaign, purchased land, sold the Religious Education Building to the Korean Church of State College, and began construction of a new building on Waupelani Drive. To reduce construction costs, members stained the trusses that would support the Sanctuary's high, open ceiling and did the interior painting.



*Waupelani building under construction (c. 1990-1991)*



*Arian Zarkower (left) and  
Reinhard Graetzer (right) – 1991*



The first service in the new building on Waupelani Drive was held in August 1991 under the leadership of the fourth settled minister, Rev. Don Marshall, who was called the previous year. Sadly, Rev. Marshall had numerous serious health problems and resigned in 1994 to go on permanent disability. He passed away a few months later.

*Don Marshall (center) at the Waupelani building dedication (1991)*

An important programmatic development in the early 1990's, facilitated by Joan Sabatino's leadership as DRE, was the introduction of the *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* curriculum. This sparked a surge of interest in feminist theology at UUFCC.

Midway through the decade, in 1995, Rev. Paul Hull was called as the fifth settled minister. However, he resigned and moved away for personal reasons in 1997.

In the late 1990's, as the Fellowship approached the start of a new millennium and its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it was certified for the first time by the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) as a "Welcoming Congregation" that publicly and lovingly embraces LGBTQ+ people. Joan Sabatino resigned in 1999 to train for the ministry. Also, underscoring the congregation's long commitment to music as a vital part of its spiritual life, Lois Durran was hired as the first, part-time Music Director.





*Mark Hayes (right) – 2004*

UUFCC called Rev. Mark Hayes as its sixth settled minister in 2000, ushering in 15 years of stable, effective ministerial leadership and congregational development. Regrettably, an early challenge for Rev. Hayes (in 2003) was to lead the congregation in addressing the alleged unprofessional behavior of its DRE, which ended with asking that employee to resign.



Subsequently, the congregation voted to expand the RE position to full-time and to include programming for adults as well as children. The first full-time Director of Lifespan Religious Education (DLRE), Jean Wiant, was hired in 2005 and served until her retirement in 2013.

*Jean Wiant*

*Amanda Richards “greeting” on  
Sunday morning*



*Ken Riznyk serving coffee  
on the “Busy Bee”  
hospitality team*



In the mid-2000's the Fellowship developed a system of Hospitality Teams to share the work of Sunday mornings more widely. Willing members were organized into standing teams of 15-20 people who served as greeters, ushers, coffee makers, and cleanup crews on Sunday mornings. Each team took responsibility for hospitality on four Sundays before handing off to the next team. This system continues in its general approach to this day. Not only has it proven to be a good way of meeting the need for Sunday-morning volunteers, but people chat, laugh, and learn more about each other as they work together.



Another of the Fellowship's ongoing traditions, First Sunday Plate Collections, was also initiated around that time. The congregation began to earmark the offering on the first Sunday of each month for a local, national, or international nonprofit. The recipient organizations are nominated by members and selected by congregational vote at mid-year and annual meetings.

*UUFCC at the Crop Walk (2010)*

Our Soulful Sundown services, which offer a quiet and meditative spiritual experience each week, were also introduced. These continue in an online video-conference format.

On the first of many social justice trips from 2007 to 2017, a few people from the Fellowship joined Unitarian Universalists across the country on a service trip to Biloxi, Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. Two years later, the Social Action Committee organized and raised funds for a trip to Puerto Rico, where 21 people from UUFCC mixed cement, dug septic tanks, and performed other tasks. In subsequent years social justice trips became an annual activity (with missions to New Orleans for more post-Katrina clean-up, West Virginia, Haiti, and Guatemala). Working with a group called Mayan Families, UUFCC groups returned to Panajachel, Guatemala three times from 2015 to 2017.





By the end of the 2000's, the congregation realized once again that it had outgrown its space and decided to expand the building on Waupelani Drive. A very successful capital campaign, conducted over three years from 2010 to 2012, raised over \$1,215,000 in pledges. A ground-breaking ceremony was held in July 2012.

*Breaking ground for the Waupelani addition (2012)*



Once again, members volunteered to stain trusses and do the interior painting. A beautiful addition, with 6,500 square feet of new space, was dedicated in 2013.

*Fellowship Hall (added in 2013)*



In 2014, following Jean Wiant's retirement, Matt Shineman was hired as DLRE. The congregation also began preparing for the retirement of Rev. Hayes in 2015. It honored his long, meritorious service by bestowing Minister Emeritus status upon his retirement.

The Fellowship began its first ministerial transition in 15 years by hiring Rev. Gabi Parks as Interim Minister. It also hired a local resident (Colleen Kennedy) as Music Director, after hiring a succession of Masters students in Penn State's School of Music. At the same time, David Morris was engaged to lead the Jazz Band.

*Left: Gabi Parks*

*Mark Hayes, portrait  
by Wendy Snetsinger (2015)*



Over the next two years, the Fellowship refined and implemented plans for a Memorial Garden to accommodate the cremated remains of UUFCC members and friends.



In 2017 the congregation called its seventh minister, Rev. Carol Thomas Cissell.

*Left: Memorial Garden plaque*

*Right: Carol Thomas Cissell*



In 2018 the Fellowship was designated as a Green Sanctuary, after meeting a rigorous set of requirements prescribed by the UUA. Ashley Hamlin was hired as the DLRE, following Matt Shineman's departure earlier that year, and continues to serve the Fellowship.

*Ashley Hamlin (right) and Peg Dobrinska (center) with UU/FCC youth at UU/United Nations Conference (2019)*





Early in Rev. CTC's ministry, with her support and leadership, a Racial Justice Task Force was established to coordinate expanded congregational awareness and activism in pursuit of racial justice. The shooting of Osaze Osagie by State College police in March 2019 further pushed the congregation into self-examination and activism around race. Osazie, a Black man with serious mental illness, was the first person ever shot and killed by local police (although State College is a majority white community). In 2020 a large "Black Lives Matter" sign was installed on the side of the Fellowship building where it would be visible from Whitehall Road.

*Left: Installation of the Black Lives Matter banner (2020)*



# UUFCC PANDEMIC COVENANT

- 01 We are grateful for this community and the opportunity to be together.
- 02 We acknowledge that assembling indoors comes with some risk of exposure to Covid and affirm our willingness to take individual action for our collective safety and well-being.
- 03 We will abide by all posted rules and verbal requests made by staff and volunteers and to take steps to reduce the risk of virus transmission, including:
  - Staying home if we suspect we have been exposed to the virus or feel unwell
  - Following the UUFCC Board approved protocols
- 04 In addition, we have the *very high expectation* that people entering this space will be up to date on *covid vaccination*.
- 05 We understand that the minister and staff are obligated to discontinue programs and services and disband any gathering if this covenant is broken and we support them in this sacred obligation.
- 06 We extend goodwill and patience to all who helped make our gathering possible as we find our way in this uncertain time.



On March 12, 2020, the Fellowship suddenly closed its building because of the COVID19 pandemic and ceased most face-to-face activities for the next two years. During those years, the congregation transitioned to Zoom services and committee meetings, and conducted two pledge campaigns entirely online. Choir members recorded hymns and anthems individually at home, which Colleen Kennedy mixed for the Zoom services. The DLRE and RE Committee organized many online and outdoor programs to support UUFCC families through the huge challenges they faced during the lockdown. Most importantly for the Fellowship's finances, the Treasurer (Betsy Allen) and Financial Secretary (Joe Kowalski) led successful applications for two federal grants that filled COVID-induced shortfalls in pledge revenue over multiple years.

*Left: UUFCC's Pandemic Covenant (2021)*

Partway through the lockdown, Rev. CTC announced her intention to resign in July 2021. A farewell celebration of her ministry was organized as an outdoor picnic on the Fellowship's grounds, with face-masks and social distancing to protect against the virus.

In August 2021, we hired Rev. Dr. Tracy Sprowls as Interim Minister. Rev. Tracy came to us with over twenty years experience in ministry which was sorely needed as we navigated Covid-19 and the complex feelings of the last minister's departure. It wasn't until March 2022 that the Fellowship finally reopened its building and began multi-platform Sunday services in person and on Zoom. The congregation's quantum leap in digital technology was supported by hiring Bhakti Chan as the Office Administrator in 2021.

*Right: Rev. Dr. Tracy Sprowls (2025)*



Because of the organizational demands of reopening and the exhaustion emerging from the COVID crisis in addition to the changing landscape of the UU Ministry in congregations in general, the process of calling a new minister proceeded slowly. Near the end of 2023, the Board accepted the recommendation of the ministerial search committee to abandon the search for a called minister and, instead, to contract with Rev. Sprowls to continue as UUFCC's eighth minister.

Despite the pandemic and changes in ministerial leadership, the work of the congregation continued, In 2023 the Fellowship voted to adopt the 8th Principle, entering a covenant to “accountably dismantle racism and oppression within ourselves and our institutions.”

*Cee Pollard (center) leading masked hospitality workers - Spring2022*



In 2024 Colleen Kennedy resigned after 9 years as Music Director. Dr. Adam Smith, was hired as the new Music Director in early 2025. Martha Jordan retired from her position as Piano Accompanist after serving for 22 years.

*Colleen Kennedy (left) and Marha Jordan (right) - 2024*



We invested in our building by replacing the roof, repaving the parking lots, upgrading the audio visual equipment, replacing the dishwasher, and adding an ADA automatic door.

*UU FCC building with new roof and pavement (2025)*





With the outbreak of war in Israel and Gaza, members continued the congregation's long tradition of demonstrating for peace at the Allen Street gates to the campus. Rev. Tracy's activism has furthered our social justice mission, connecting our community to pressing social justice endeavors of the day. In April of 2025, Rev. Tracy helped organize and then MC'd the Hands Off rally against the DOGE cuts here in State College.

To be continued...