

Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing: A Short History

John H. Sanford, Universalist minister and newspaper publisher, could be considered the father of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing. In 1847 he came to Lansing from Ann Arbor and formed a Universalist society. He was also the publisher of Lansing's first newspaper, *The Primitive Expounder*. Since 1847 this church has had about 40 ministers and coordinators, both settled and interim. Over this same time, the congregation has met in nearly a dozen different locations. A book written by members of the Archives Committee provides details of this history (Busch E, Beckman S, Schwarzweller H, [Dedicated Lives: 162 Years of Liberal Ministry and Its Ministers in Lansing, Michigan 1849-2011](#)).

On March 16, 1849 the church's incorporation papers were signed. In 1852 the Rev. C.W. Knickerbocker came to Lansing to serve the society as its minister. In a meeting at the Capitol on October 24, 1852, the society adopted a constitution and by-laws. There were about 65 members and services were held in the Capitol building or in a Lansing school.

In 1863 a brick church was built and dedicated at the corner of Grand Avenue and Allegan Street. The cost of construction was \$6,000. Thirty years and eleven ministers later a new church was built on the corner of Capital Avenue and Ottawa Street. The land was deeded to the congregation by Sarah Vanderroot Emery. A rose window was placed in the north wall of the building in her memory. It was here that Augusta Jane Chapin was ordained and served as minister from 1881-82. The Rev. Chapin was the second woman ordained in the Universalist Church and the first woman in the country to be awarded an honorary doctor of divinity degree. (Olympia Brown was the first woman to be ordained, a few months before Chapin.)

Several different Lansing buildings have been home to the Universalist congregation over the years. In her history, [Ideas Have Consequences, 125 Years of the Liberal Tradition in the Lansing Area](#), Emma Shore ("Jerry") Thornton wrote that the Universalist Church had its ups and downs during the early years. The original church property was sold for financial reasons after the panic of 1893. The 1930s depression affected the church with ministers taking pay cuts and accepting promissory notes. A merger with Plymouth Congregational Church was considered. By 1935 church membership had shrunk to 71 members. It was the hard work of the women of the church that held the congregation together through fundraisers and cleaning and refurbishing the building.

During the 1940s several Unitarian families moved to the Lansing area from Ann Arbor. They founded the Unitarian Fellowship of East Lansing and Mason, affiliating with the American Unitarian Association in March 1949. In 1957, Lansing area Universalists and Unitarians merged, four years before the national merger took place, becoming the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing (UUCGL).

UUCGL's first home was at Holmes and Prospect, but it was sold in 1966. The congregation met at Kendon Elementary School in Lansing for four years and then moved to Red Cedar School in East Lansing for Sunday services. In 1971 the church purchased the former fraternity house at 855 Grove Street and for a period of time shared the space with Kehillat Israel (a Jewish congregation now located in Lansing), a day-care center and Fellowship for Today (spiritual community).

Over the years the congregation worked to make the 855 Grove Street building meet the needs of our congregation. Interior walls were removed and dorm rooms transformed into religious education classrooms. Long-time members remember when a wall mostly divided the space used for worship

services, and the joy experienced when it was removed in 1975. The assembly hall (sanctuary), front entrance and the Marion Vaughan parlor were added in 1983. (The mortgages on that addition and later renovations for accessibility purposes were paid off in 1996.) But the building was on three floors with no elevator. For some years the church rented out upstairs rooms as office space. We reclaimed this space, and the former caretaker apartment, for classrooms in 2001. Until we sold the building, the Peace Education Center had an office in on the third floor.

There were accomplishments as well as some turmoil in the early 1990s. The church worked to improve accessibility, and a small Capital Campaign was held to raise funds for improvements, including a ramp to the podium, automatic front doors, an accessible restroom, and wider hallways. Over the years we investigated possibilities for installing an elevator (challenging in that building and expensive). A program to have an American Sign Language interpreter for the hearing impaired at Sunday services was initiated. There was growth in membership, and crowding during Sunday services. The minister did not want to conduct two services, and an early service was organized and conducted for a couple of years by laypeople. In 1994, a group left this church to form All Souls UU Church in Lansing, in an effort to serve a more diverse congregation and to become more socially active. Services there ended in 2001.

Two worship services were initiated in 2001 under an interim minister to alleviate crowding. After the arrival of Rev. Kathryn A. Bert as our settled minister in 2002, there was growth in membership and stability occurred within the congregation, with enthusiasm for Rev. Bert's ministry.

The building's deficiencies, including lack of accessibility, insufficient parking, and too little space for worship services and program became more prominent. During the years 2005-2009, the Strategic Planning Committee considered various options related to the building. Conclusions in 2008 of an Ad Hoc Space Planning Committee were that the congregation has agreed that building improvements are needed; and six options have been considered (including renovation & relocation); possible preliminary plans for renovation were drawn and costs estimated.

In 2011, with participation from a UUA consultant, the Board and Strategic Planning Committee recommended exploring various relocation possibilities for 6 months (Discovering Our Place: Six Months on the Path). There was extensive discussion by the congregation, culminating with a vote of approval at the April congregational meeting. The Board subsequently engaged a realtor. At the June 2011 Congregational Meeting, a set of criteria was approved for a new building search. A constitutional amendment was passed to require a quorum of 1/3 of members, and approval of 2/3 of members, when voting for selling or buying a building or taking out a mortgage.

At the October 2011 Congregational Meeting, the approved motions included: Moving to a new location is an acceptable direction (97% voted yes); and the Board may pursue feasibility of purchasing a church building in Okemos that was for sale (80% voted yes). When a conditional purchase offer was refused, the Board decided to continue to look for other properties and also decided that we should not actively pursue major additions to 855 Grove Street because of very large cost estimates for the amount of new space possible, and the understanding that land and parking disadvantages could not be alleviated.

In August 2014 a new task force, charged to consider both existing buildings and the option of purchasing property to build, became aware of the school building for sale at 5509 South Pennsylvania

Avenue (former home of Lansing Christian School and then the Capital Area Academy). The property included over 9 acres of land and was adjacent to a bus line and the South Lansing Pathway, a \$2.1 M hiking/biking trail. The building was 3 times as large as the 855 Grove Street building, had a gym that could be converted to serve as a sanctuary, and was fully accessible. At a congregational meeting in November 2014, members vote on the proposed purchase, which passed with 89% voting in favor.

In December the Board selected an architect and workshops were scheduled to get input from congregants on major design features for remodeling. A 4-person Dream Implementation Team was established to direct and coordinate planning. In conjunction with the Board, they appointed chairs of Dream Focus Groups to recommend specific plans for various parts of the building (worship space, office/administrative space, religious education space, social hall/kitchen space, exterior/outdoor space). These focus groups, open to all congregants who wanted to be involved, started meeting in mid-January and reports were submitted in February; more than 30 members participated.

In January 2015, the Board delineated two overarching values that should be general priorities in all planning for the building and grounds:

- Welcoming/Inclusiveness/Accessibility: We will create an inspiring home in which to welcome all (visitors and ourselves), with full accessibility that allows for full participation in congregational life for people of all abilities. This implies providing opportunities for worshiping together, studying and learning, and joining together as a community in many different ways, large and small.
- Environmental sustainability: We will renovate the South Pennsylvania Avenue property in a sustainable, energy-efficient, and fiscally responsible manner.

We received bids from three contractors in early July – the bids (\$2.83M-\$2.98M) were all much higher than anticipated (in part due to high subcontractor bids). After interviews, a contractor was selected and there was extensive discussion of changes in plans to reduce costs (value engineering).

We obtained a \$900,000 construction loan from Dart Bank, based in part on a UUA loan guarantee. The earliest the construction could begin was September 2015. A condition of the sale of the Grove Street building was moving out by April 1, 2016, which set a timeline that seemed feasible for the construction. In February and March, it became clear that the construction could not be finished by April 1. Plans were made to hold worship services in April at the Islamic Center of East Lansing, which was a wonderful experience for all. In April, construction was proceeding, but a few glitches delayed completion, and worship services in May were held outdoors on the grounds of our new property, and some of these were combined with work parties. During the entire construction period, many very successful work parties were held, with volunteers contributing immensely to preparing for construction, preparing and painting the entire RE wing and office/administrative wing, doing many minor construction projects, and lots of items too numerous to mention. These were essential to provide cost savings and involve many congregants in the entire process.

Finally, after synchronizing final details with required inspections, the building was approved for occupancy and we moved in on June 1. Only 4 days later, on June 5, 2016, we held the first Sunday morning worship service. Over the next year, volunteers took on many new tasks, including relocation and design of the Memorial Garden with rededication by our interim minister, maintenance and design of the grounds around the building, elimination of invasive species including destructive Japanese knotweed near the building, building maintenance and installation of a new roof.

During the construction, move and follow-up period, a lot of time and energy of both congregants and staff was focused on meeting immediate deadlines. The relocation has facilitated rededication to a variety of Social Justice efforts and the initiation of new programs, including English as a Second Language for refugees and immigrants who live in the community near the church, and partnership with an elementary school nearby in which most students are minority and low-income.