

50th Anniversary History of RRUUC

Joan M. Zenzen

This history is an update from the one Joan Zenzen completed for the 40th anniversary of River Road. This history generally covers the period from 1999-2009.

Rev. Scott Alexander, who has served as senior minister of River Road since 1998, has matched his missionary zeal with an attention to many details surrounding the Sunday service. He formalized worship services by adding significant rituals, such as lighting of candles to mark personal joys and sorrows and having the congregation sing “Spirit of Life” at the end of Joys and Sorrows. Rev. Alexander has used several yearlong sermon series, such as his guide to full religious living, to educate the congregation about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. He stands out on the plaza each Sunday and personally greets people as they enter the building, plus he has made sure that the sanctuary looks clean and fresh. He has been known to walk around the building with a can of white paint and a paint brush, just to spiffy the place up. During two sabbaticals, in 2005 and 2008, he rode across the United States and raised more than \$17,000 for La Clinica del Pueblo in Washington, DC, an organization that provides quality health services to under- and uninsured individuals. He has had a strong interest in meeting the pastoral care needs of the congregation and helped develop a lay-ministerial pastoral care program.

Three other ministers have also served River Road over the past ten years. Ginger Luke, who came to RRUUC in 1994 as Director of Religious Education under Rev. Bill Murry’s ministry, completed in 2001 her coursework and training at Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary and was granted preliminary fellowship into the UU ministry. River Road then underwent a discernment process to determine if it wanted to call Rev. Luke as one of its ministers and at the June 2002 Annual Meeting, the congregation voted by acclamation to move forward with this; River Road ordained and installed Rev. Luke in November 2002 as Minister of Religious Education. She now serves a larger role as Minister of Religious Education and Congregational Life. Rev. Lynn Strauss joined River Road in summer 2000 as Associate Minister, a recognition of the expanding membership and needs of the congregation. Rev. Strauss brought a quiet, contemplative atmosphere to the congregation, providing a nice balance to the energy and enthusiasm of Rev. Alexander. Rev. Strauss introduced covenant groups, bringing people into small-group ministry to offset the big church feel that bothered some congregants. She also made substantive contributions to social justice issues and expanded the religious texts used in services by preaching on how Jewish and Muslim practices and beliefs had lessons for UUs. She encouraged River Road to become a teaching congregation, resulting in having Amanda Poppei (2005-7) and Megan Foley (2007-8) as ministerial interns. Rev. Strauss resigned in summer 2005 to lead the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville. Finally, Rev. Russ Savage served River Road in 2007-2008 while Rev. Luke took a one-year leave of absence to serve as interim MRE at the Ann Arbor, Michigan, congregation close to her daughter Katherine and grandchildren. Rev. Savage brought his strong organizational skills to River Road, helping with the transition from Church Administrator Bill Ades (who had replaced Rebecca Birnie upon her retirement in 2003) to our current Director of Administration Andy Taylor. Rev. Savage also shared his sense of humor at community events and preached frequently about the Christian roots of our faith.

Rev. Luke made some important contributions to the religious education program. She hired Dolores Miller in 1998, recognizing Dolores's skill for using theatre and storytelling to educate children and youth about our UU faith. Dolores first transformed the summer program using favorite children's literature, such as books by Dr. Seuss and Leo Lionni, to illustrate the seven UU principles. She then connected with adults and found ways to use their individual talents and interests to address Sunday school needs and keep the programs thriving. Rev. Luke also hired Jan Taddeo to serve as the youth ministry coordinator for the high schoolers. Jan brought attention to the congregation's growing youth program and supported its efforts to engage in social justice activities (more on that below). Upon Jan's departure in 2007 and Dolores's departure in 2008, Rev. Luke decided to elevate the youth program and put it on the same level as the children's programming. She created two DRE positions, each at three-quarter time, for Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry. She placed Jan's replacement Beth Irikura in the Youth Minister position and hired first Lisa Farley (who resigned due to health issues) and now Kerridwen Henry as the Children's Minister.

The religious education program thrives thanks to the dedication of these staff members and the contributions of many different adults. These adults (and some teens) teach Sunday School classes, help in the nursery, gather supplies for classes, volunteer at holiday parties, provide input for class curriculum and the overall RE program, and serve as mentors to our young people. Many of these individuals generously give of their time and talents in a way that makes a substantial positive difference to our children and youth. In honor of these special people, the RE Committee started in 2001-2002 the Muriel Davies Award for Excellence in Religious Education. Muriel Davies, widow of the inspiring Rev. A. Powell Davies, was River Road's first staff member who organized our School of Religion and served in an administrative capacity. She agreed to allow this award be named in her honor if each year more than one individual received the award. She knew that it takes many different committed people to make our RE program successful and engage our youth in our liberal faith.

The entire congregation has engaged in activities that speak to our commitment to our community and its place in the larger world. River Road became a Welcoming Congregation in 1995 to nurture and support the contributions of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons and advocate for their justice, freedom, and equality within the larger society. In June 2006, following a multi-year effort, the congregation also voted to become a Green Sanctuary. This commitment means that River Roaders will make every effort, when possible and feasible, to seek out sustainable choices that are environmentally conscious and responsible. The congregation has embraced recycling (especially during the bazaar with tons of recyclable materials salvaged and sent to recycling centers) and has recently started a vegetable garden in a joint effort with the religious education program. River Roaders have reached out in material ways to UUs across the world through the Unitarian Universalist Association's partner church program. River Road first established in February 1992 a relationship with a Unitarian church in Fiatfalva, Romania, and in October 2006, River Road also became a partner church with a Unitarian congregation in Kyrdem, in the Khasi Hills of northeast India. River Roaders have visited the Fiatfalva church on several occasions and raised funds to buy that church a tractor to help the entire village and have supplemented the minister's meager salary and provided scholarship money to help village students attend high school or technical school. For the

Kyrdem church, River Roaders have provided funds for an additional teacher, a new grade, and a public latrine for the village.

Social justice continues to define and uplift the work at River Road. New task forces, such as the Africa Task Force formed in summer 2006, have brought attention to the varied issues of poverty, poor health, HIV/AIDS, damaging governments, and environmental concerns affecting the continent. The Alternative Gift Market, begun in 1999 and based on a similar program conducted in the Portland, Oregon UU congregation, encourages River Roaders to make donations to local, national, and international non-profit organizations as gifts to family members and friends. This program has raised more than \$170,000 since its beginnings. When the congregation embraced a new strategic plan in 2006, an important component involved developing an all-social justice activity. This call for action developed into ACTION Week -- a full week of activities in which both adults and children work with organizations needing assistance. Some favorite activities over the past three years have been helping at the Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary, cleaning trash out of the Anacostia River, helping build a house with Habitat for Humanity, and making cards for children at the NIH Children's Inn. River Roaders all join together for a celebratory feast at the end of the week to share stories. Another community-building activity has been annual fundraising events to support our college access scholarship fund, our partner churches, and our commitment to Latin American causes. Using music, good food, and art, these events have raised significant amounts of money while also raising the sense of commitment and community within our congregation. Many congregational members participate in programs to feed the homeless such as 2nd Tuesdays at Shepherd's Table and Shelter Week -- the week-long feeding of residents at shelters in Rockville, Maryland.

One person gave a face and vision to River Road's social justice activities. Mary Rose Curtis recently moved to Virginia to live closer to family, but her imprint will long remain. She advocated for worker's rights and pressed River Roaders to collect and donate personal care products to give to immigrant farm workers on the Eastern Shore to help protect them and their children from pesticides. She raised a voice against military recruitment of students in local schools and worked toward racial and social equality by having River Road air films and conduct conversations about the issues. She was also a longtime organizer of the Sunday Coffee Controversy & Conversation program, inviting a range of speakers to share their expertise and open the forum for healthy discussion.

Our youth have taken a special interest in social justice issues while also making the transition to young adults. They have sponsored teen coffeehouses with Walt Whitman High School to provide an alternative drug- and alcohol-free social activity and also raise money for special social justice causes. Car washes, food collection and sorting, and time spent at local shelters have helped youth donate time and funds to help the homeless and less fortunate in the local area. Murder mystery theatres have allowed youth to showcase their acting skills, build community, and raise money to support such efforts as building and equipping a computer laboratory in Santa Marta, El Salvador. Many of our youth have taken the transformational step to spend two weeks in the summer on annual trips to El Salvador to learn about the culture and history of the country and help with farming or other tasks in a local village.

In all of these activities and more, volunteers have made River Road a welcoming place of action and change. We continue to thrive thanks to the sustained contributions and dedication of our many longtime members and friends. Some of us join together in artists groups and writing groups to explore our creativity. Others express their creativity through mindful knitting, making shawls and other knitted items to show support and care to those in need. Groups meet regularly to share food and conversation and gain insight into how others think. We have many who share their gardening skills to keep our grounds healthy and beautiful while others pay attention to our building and make sure it remains a welcoming architectural statement and home to our congregation.

We also attract newcomers, and their many talents, thanks to the welcoming attitude of our congregants and the good work of such committees as Membership, Greeters, and Ushers. Sheri Blanchette, who joined River Road in December 2003 as Membership Coordinator and now serves as Director of Communications and Outreach, has helped to integrate strategic planning objectives, Board priorities, and staff direction to help ensure that visitors receive a warm welcome, receive follow-up information, and explore our Unitarian Universalist faith as expressed at River Road. Bring-a-Friend Sundays, New Member Recognition services and receptions, and special outreach efforts have helped to grow our membership and keep people involved at all levels of the congregation.

The RRUUC office staff continues to provide overwhelming support for the many RRUUC activities. In addition to Andy Taylor and Sheri Blanchette, already mentioned, Diana Chimes serves as our bookkeeper and is responsible for all of the congregation's financial data management. Ota Safertal serves as administrative assistant, keeps track of our full calendar, schedules our many rentals, and coordinates our faithful office volunteers. Sheri, Diana, and Ota worked tirelessly and successfully to keep the office running smoothly in the interval between administrators in 2007-8.

River Road's music program has continued to flourish under the direction of Clif Hardin. Now fulltime, Clif has poured his creativity into writing original choral pieces. The adult choir performed his Requiem again in 2006, producing a CD in the process. His piece "Welcome! Welcome!" has become a favorite for UU congregations around the country to start each church year. The Music Committee and the Board encouraged Clif to record a CD of his music, which resulted in his Anthem CD released in 2008. Clif expanded the offerings for the children and youth by conducting three choirs, Chalice Lighters for kindergarten through second grade, River Road Youth for third through fifth grade, and the River Road Teen Choir for middle and high school ages. The adult choir continues to perform in two special music services each year while also singing each Sunday. Clif and the ministers artfully integrate musical selections into the overall service. Addie Edelson, as accompanist, has a beautiful touch on the refurbished grand piano. River Road's music program has also stepped out into social justice recently, working with Christian and Jewish congregations to put on an Interfaith AIDS benefit concert.

Two events have literally changed the look of River Road. The first one is our name change. The 2006-2011 Strategic Plan called on the congregation to undertake a yearlong process to examine our name and determine if we should keep it or change it, to meet the needs of our diverse membership. The congregation conducted in 2006-2007 a series of listening sessions

and meetings amongst the many different congregational groups to talk about what River Road means to each of us and how our name may or may not represent those meanings. A special committee led these listening sessions and compiled the results of a survey to aid in a congregational discussion at the 2007 Annual Meeting. After this thoughtful process and a deliberate attempt to hear and consider a range of viewpoints, the congregation voted in June 2007 overwhelmingly to change its name to River Road Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

The second change has been to our building. Our congregation, beginning in 1995 under the 2020 Committee, started the process of evaluating our space and determining what steps might be taken to address rising membership numbers and inadequate spaces in our original building. Following evaluation of this committee's report and input from a consultant, the congregation underwent a strategic planning process, which emphasized in the 1997-2002 strategic plan first exploring the idea of calling a second minister, increasing programming offered to congregants, and then undertaking a building expansion to satisfy identified needs. Once River Road had chosen Rev. Lynn Strauss as its second minister in 2000 and enhanced programming, the congregation moved forward on a building expansion. The Building Planning Group, chaired by Sally Watts, led this effort for the next eight years. A conceptual design emerged in 2001, emphasizing a large Fellowship Hall, a new kitchen, a walk-in coatroom, washrooms on the main level, overflow seating from the sanctuary, and classrooms to replace trailer space then used to accommodate the additional RE classes. A Bridge Design emerged by early 2004 as the preferred option, providing 7,500 square feet for a Fellowship Hall, kitchen, and three classrooms on the lower level. The congregation voted in 2002 in favor of a capital campaign and raised \$2.0 million the following year. A mini-campaign in 2005 raised another \$600,000, and River Road signed a construction contract. In December of 2005 the congregation gathered at the site of the new building, and Dan Lewis, a longtime supporter of the entire project, and other members helped to dig the first shovelfuls; a building permit was issued in April 2006. After Dan's passing in January 2006, the Board honored his decades-long commitment to the congregation by renaming its distinguished Service Award in his memory. Another mini-campaign plus memorial gifts and interest on project funds raised an additional \$600,000. Renovation work on the original building proceeded during construction of the addition, focusing on heating and cooling, lighting, flooring, a new roof. The congregation celebrated in September 2008 the completion of construction with a new building dedication. Since then, renovation has continued with reconstruction of the plaza and foyer.

The new space echoes the original building while addressing the needs of the future. As described in the 40th anniversary history, in the early 1960s, River Roaders gathered their ideas together as a design guide. Key themes included unity, openness, simplicity, and the beauty of nature. Natural materials would combine with contemporary design to let nature in and provide an open and inviting space for all people to feel welcome. Plus, the architect had a special treat for worshippers. The irregular brick pattern on the wall behind the pulpit does not represent sloppy masonry work. Instead, these subtle irregularities in the brickwork and mortar created an intentionally modulated surface, inviting worshippers to watch the interplay of sunlight and brick across the surface, with shadows moving slowly across the wall as the worship service progressed.

When it came time to design the addition with its fellowship hall, River Roaders remained committed to retaining the same key elements that had shaped our original building. Our architects for the addition, MTFA Architecture, agreed. They wanted the addition to be aesthetically respectful of the original but also compelling enough to capture the imagination of the congregation. They accomplished this task beautifully by honoring the shape of the original building but reinterpreting it for the 21st century. For example, the glass leaf fossil wall that separates the fellowship hall from the hallway represents our awareness of nature, lets light in passively, but uses technology and design ideas that were not available in the 1960s. Energy-saving features in the insulation, lighting, and windows also make the addition environmentally friendly while allowing nature to surround us with views to our backyard grounds. Unity, openness, simplicity, and the beauty of nature permeate the original building and addition seamlessly.

As River Road begins its next 50 years, the congregation carries forth its history and looks forward to the possibilities and challenges of the future.