

A History of River Road Unitarian Church:  
In Commemoration of its Fortieth Anniversary  
by Joan M. Zenzen

RRUC's origins trace back to the inspiring presence of A. Powell Davies, who served as minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in downtown Washington, DC until his death in 1958. His intellectual power and missionary zeal drew thousands of post-World War II families to the Unitarian faith. His direct attack on Sen. Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communism crusade made front-page news in *The Washington Post* and helped promote the Unitarian message of compassion for and faith in every human individual. This message struck a chord, and ultimately Davies helped spawn twelve new Unitarian congregations in the Greater Washington Area.

One of the first was the Unitarian Church of Montgomery County, now known as Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church. UCMC began in 1950, meeting at the Chevy Chase Women's Club with Davies's sermons piped in over telephone wires. By 1958, with a church building built on Cedar Lane in Kensington, the newly renamed Cedar Lane Unitarian Church had attracted so many members with children that three School of Religion sessions were needed to handle the demand. Debate then ensued as to whether Cedar Lane should expand its current facilities or promote the establishment of new Unitarian centers. CLUC board member Curt Adams advocated the latter choice, which became the accepted approach. A center in Rockville failed to relieve pressure at Cedar Lane, and by the end of 1958, Curt Adams had been appointed chairman of a committee to form a new Unitarian center in Bethesda/Chevy Chase. Another center was also started in Silver Spring.

In 1959, the Unitarian Center of Bethesda/Chevy Chase, now known as River Road Unitarian Church, began to take shape. One of the key events in this early history was the news that Muriel Davies, wife of the late A. Powell Davies and a considerable force of her own dedicated to Unitarian religious education, would be interested in organizing the School of Religion for a new Bethesda/Chevy Chase Center and serving in an administrative capacity. The newly selected Temporary Management Committee, with Curt Adams on board as the Cedar Lane representative, signed Muriel Davies on in May 1959 as Director of the Center.

Now needing a place to worship and hold Sunday School classes, the management committee selected Radnor Elementary School. Elizabeth Stark and Thelma Adams had met with this school's principal, Miss Byrnes, whom they knew well through the attendance of their own children there. As Thelma Adams later wrote, "Miss Byrnes was cordial but cautious — wanting to know about all our Sunday needs and arrangements. Finally, she (a member of the Catholic church) said, 'All right, you may use the Radnor School on Sundays, but I just wish you weren't Unitarians!'" Such reluctance was apparent for as Florence van Straten remembered, complaints from the school came each Monday, citing how the center's children had disturbed or damaged something at the school. "Diplomacy reached its highest level," van Straten wrote, "because our existence depended upon our Sunday occupancy of Radnor." At the first service on October 4, 1959, the strength of interest in the new center could be seen in the 191 registered children in the School of Religion classes. A month later, the congregation adopted Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws and discussed land acquisition, a ministerial search, and plans for a church "large

enough but not too large.” Mary Estelle Ellinwood provided volunteer direction for a small choir. The foundation was now set for River Road Unitarian Church.

One well-remembered service held at Radnor Elementary School honored the life of assassinated President John F. Kennedy. Across-the-street neighbors and close friends of Brad and Shirley Patterson were Sen. and Mrs. Frank Church of Idaho. Their son Forrest was a close friend of son Bruce Patterson. They asked Sen. Church to give a eulogy/sermon in memory of President Kennedy, in which there was not a single dry eye in the place, including the Senator’s. It was Forrest Church’s first visit to a Unitarian church, and as Shirley Patterson later noted, Forrest has gone on to become one of UU’s most renowned authors and ministers.

In quick succession, the new Bethesda/Chevy Chase center found land to build its own church, chose a name, and hired its first minister. Stanford Pratt, Ed Bennett, and Ed Lazowska approached the son of builder Mr. Abraham Kaye, asking to buy land at the corner of River Road and Whittier Boulevard where Mr. Kaye was just getting ready to put in a new subdivision. The son proved resistant to the idea, but Mr. Kaye offered the land at an attractive price. The father, a philanthropist, knew that having a church in his subdivision would be attractive to potential home buyers and that the proposed tract would be difficult to develop for houses. The congregation approved the 4.66-acre purchase in July 1960 and signed a contract in October for payment of \$12,000 per acre, \$2,500 cash, 4 percent interest for five years, with the total land cost being \$55,920.

In November 1960, after four ballots at a congregational meeting, members chose the name River Road Unitarian Church. Other names suggested had included Jefferson Unitarian Church, The Unitarian Church of the Potomac, West Bethesda Unitarian Church, The Unitarian Church of Bethesda, and the Unitarian Church of Bethesda/Chevy Chase. The name Little Falls Unitarian Church was a strong contender until someone said simply, “Remember Cedar Lane Unitarian Church — CLUC (as in chicken).” New Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws were also adopted.

A Pulpit Committee then faced the daunting task of finding a minister for the building-less church with a fairly low treasury. Rev. Robert J. Lewis, thirty years old and former part-time minister of the Unitarian Fellowship in Hagerstown, MD and executive director of the Hagerstown Goodwill Industries, accepted the call in May 1961. His interest in civil rights would dovetail well with the social concerns activities of this newly emerging church.

River Road Unitarian Church continued to grow, making a proper church building necessary. By fall of 1961, with 180 families attending and 229 members, the congregation expanded its classes to meet both at Radnor and Whittier Woods Elementary School. In April 1962, the congregation authorized a building program, and after gathering ideas from members about how they envisioned their new faith home to look like, the Board of Trustees signed a contract with the architectural firm of Keyes, Lethbridge & Condon. Dale Wright, John Chandler, and Ed Bennett proved especially helpful in making sure the ideas of the congregation were articulated in the final design by architect Donald Lethbridge.

Certain themes, inherent in Unitarian principles, guided this design. Materials and esthetic qualities were to create a unity of effect so as to symbolize that Unitarians are a unity in diversity, imposing no dogma but believing in the freedom of the mind and spirit. The church would be warm and inviting to symbolize Unitarian concern for people and an openness to the world. The church would be creative and artistic, yet simple and honest, combining modern and traditional materials and design concepts in a contemporary structure because Unitarians use their heritage creatively. To recognize the Unitarians's love of beauty in both nature and in human works, the church would be beautiful and integrated within its terrain. And, finally, the church would provide an appropriate and functional setting for many different activities because the church is not the end in itself. At the June 14, 1964 groundbreaking for the church, members held hands along the perimeter of where the church would be built. As Brad Patterson later remembered, "By holding hands where the walls would be, we symbolized what our church would be: all of us together as a congregation."

Construction of the \$535,000 church brought forth many challenges. The now 289 members committed \$162,000 towards financing the building, but clearly they could not cover all of the expense. In addition, many of them had already aided previous Unitarian churches in their building drives before moving to River Road. So, the board opted for a "pay-as-you-go" approach, asking members who joined later to contribute toward paying off the mortgage. In addition, the congregation's attachment to nature made for some conflict once the bulldozers appeared. People who did not want to see a single tree or bush unnecessarily cut down fought with the builders who wanted access to the area. As Florence van Straten later wrote, "Ribbons around precious trees and 'over my dead body' were the order of the day." Another conflict was whether to fund the construction of the bell tower. Some argued it was not necessary but others pointed to the visual completion the tower gave to the building. An anonymous \$5,000 gift made the bell-less bell tower possible.

What cannot be denied is the successful integration of all these concerns into a building dedicated on June 27, 1965 and moved into in September 1965. It won many architectural awards, including the acclaim of the American Institute of Architects, who named our church one of the ten best buildings constructed anywhere in the world in 1966. As the jury award stated, this church is "a handsomely unpretentious building which expresses the Unitarian philosophy with clarity and vigor. In contrast with so many contemporary churches, this one does not strain for dramatic effect. Instead it achieves crisp simplicity and effortless variety, and its rapport with its wooded site is thoroughly pleasing. Viewed from any position, the relationship of forms is delightful."

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Did you know? . . . On October 5, 1963, River Road Unitarian Church held its first true bazaar, called "Fair with a Flair." Since RRUC's building was still in the planning stages, members used Cedar Lane Unitarian Church for the benefit. Total proceeds reached about \$2,000. In 1998, the bazaar made more than \$50,000.  
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Just as the beautiful church building embodied the congregation's commitment to the larger world, the members themselves during RRUC's early years actively participated in a range of social

justice activities, many of them coordinated under the Women's Alliance. Social concern and action have been continuing hallmarks in this church. Representatives appeared before the Montgomery County Council to help preserve a historically black neighborhood in Glen Echo from being bought out by developers, anxious to profit from the valuable land. In 1963, Janet Koch and Vilma Adler chaired weekly group visits to Junior Village in DC, giving personal attention to orphaned preschoolers while also collecting toys and clothing for the children. Beginning in 1964, others served as volunteer tutors in the Cabin John Study program, helping newly integrated black youngsters catch up to their white peers. For many summers, classrooms at the newly erected church served as tutoring rooms for youngsters between fourth and seventh grade having difficulty in arithmetic and/or reading. This program, called Operation Catch-up, involved women of the church picking up the youngsters and bringing them to RRUC, where teenage tutors would help them. Schools were at first reluctant to recommend students but after one year, they were calling the church asking if the program would be repeated and wanting to start their lists of prospective students. The teenage tutors also benefited from this experience. As one member stated, "These teenagers have stars in their eyes just like those in the eyes of the young people coming into the Peace Corps." Nationally, RRUCers participated in the 1963 civil rights March on Washington, and in March 1965, Rev. Lewis joined 25 Unitarian Universalist leaders in Selma, AL for the March to Montgomery to protest the state's poor civil rights record. As another embodiment of the church's interest in social concerns, members approved in 1969 the establishment of a day care center for low income families. A nonprofit cooperative nursery school occupied additional space since 1966.

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Fran Yankauer remembers. . . Marge Armstrong was "one early member who helped awaken all of us to the inequities existing beyond our church walls in Montgomery County. Marge, as chair of our social concerns committee, was the moving force in getting us involved in helping solve some of them. In the 60's and before, there were covenants attached to house deeds which blatantly discriminated in both racial and religious terms. Before the national law was enacted, Marge was a leader in framing Montgomery County's comprehensive open housing ordinance as well as organizing the efforts to uphold that law at the polls when it was challenged. Many of us went door to door for our neighbors' signatures indicating to the County Council that we wanted this county open to all. With the combined help of other religious congregations, county activists, and the League of Women Voters, the fair housing law was on the books in 1968."  
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The energy exercised in social responsibility programs mirrored the growth and enthusiasm of the River Road congregation as a whole. By February 1966, the board faced the challenging question of how best to deal with the church's phenomenal growth. A special planning committee analyzed the situation. Religious Education enrollment had risen to 483 students, topping out the designed space of 15 students in each of 16 classrooms, times two sessions. Average adult Sunday attendance had reached 315 persons, well within the design limits of the church building. Growth at River Road clearly came from families with children, and the School of Religion was a dominant concern for the congregation. And, these same families valued the friendships and sense of community their middle-sized church included.

In response to this situation, the committee recommended that the church resolve to remain a one-minister church of some 500 members and about 500 RE students. Guiding this recommendation was the fear that growth would jeopardize the personal touch and communication they believed the smaller size church encouraged. To keep the size small while also accommodating continued interest in Unitarianism in lower Montgomery County, the committee recommended that RE class sizes be increased slightly at the discretion of the RE director and that the board work with area Unitarian churches to consider the establishment of additional congregations in the county. River Road in 1967 added a Wednesday night session for adults and children, which attracted around 50 individuals at its height.

This expansive growth in adult membership and religious education registrations soon fizzled and took a dramatic turn downward. Between 1968 and 1973, membership dropped from 454 to 334. Many reasons contributed to this shift. First, in January 1968, within two days of each other, Rev. Lewis and Religious Education Director Muriel Davies submitted their resignations as their different approaches led to conflict. This was a shock to the church. Rev. Lewis left on June 12, 1968 and went into counseling work. Davies was convinced by the board to stay on, but she ultimately left on December 2, 1970. The church had now lost its first two professional leaders. Second, when River Roaders searched for a new minister, calling Rev. James Curtis in October 1969, it was clear that a strong minority within the church opposed his selection. The board telephoned Rev. Curtis and discussed the situation with him. He accepted the call, but many older members found his innovative services unsettling and resigned. Third, homes in the immediate area of the church became prohibitively expensive, forcing young married couples to settle outside the church's surrounding neighborhoods. Religious education registration plummeted, in part because fewer young families were joining and in part because the original crop of families had older children who had already graduated from the RE classes. Fourth, the political and social climate of the nation, with anti-Vietnam protests and calls for racial justice and women's liberation, encouraged free and individualized thinking that challenged authority and the status quo, as represented for some people in churches, even Unitarian ones.

But for those people, young and old, who did venture into River Road Unitarian Church during the early 1970s, they found an innovative and engaging minister in Rev. Curtis. Anne Rippey Edwards recalled that she and her family had been active at Cedar Lane and not thinking about switching churches. But, after hearing Rev. Curtis's candidating sermon, they decided to join River Road and "delighted in the programs Jim presented with his flair for poetry, incorporation of music into the theme of the sermon, and his artistic use of the pulpit as theater with colorful costume and stage design." Krystyna Edmondson remembered fondly that "Sunday service decorations often achieved symbolism and drama through massive candlelight, long swaths of fabric suspended in the air and sculpture — including Jim's own 'found art crucifix.'" To encourage discussion across generations and confront the tensions and conflicts pervasive in society, Rev. Curtis organized family and intergenerational workshops. In these settings, children, teenagers, and adults shared conversations and worked toward greater understanding. As Marguerite Rhodes later remembered, "Jim's style of leadership was not aggressive; he'd get that owlish smile when things were going well, sit on his haunches watching with pleasure; and he would just blank out when things went amiss and let participants work problems out as best they

could. . . . Jim maneuvered in his quiet way and offered opportunities for all of us to better understand each other.”

Rev. Curtis’s encouraging style and interest in the arts led to a flowering of creative expression within the church. As Bob Peterson noted, “Jim’s creativity and enthusiasm, so freely shared with others, led River Road to become fertile ground for the artistic, musical and literary expression of others. In addition to the many exhibitions of graphic art and the concerts so regularly part of church life, River Road had an active society of poets which published the work of contributors. Many of the contributors to RR’s esthetic life were people who had never before ‘gone public’ with their creative work.” As Anne Petersen emphasized, through “music, poetry, and theater, he explored the far reaches of his beliefs and values, challenging us to become better, more caring human beings.”

Here was the crux of Rev. Curtis’s gifts in ministry. He gave many people the tools and opportunities to become better, more caring individuals. Marilyn Heilprin still uses his mantra I.A.L.A.C., “I Am Loving And Capable.” “How much we need to hear that — whether we are ‘all grown up’ or still children — as we dodge the slings and arrows of our particular lives.” With his sudden death from liver failure in June 1973, he left a congregation saddened by his loss but strengthened by his work. The creative blending of music, art, and poetry in later Sunday services results in part from his example. And, the church still has his widow Mary Rose Curtis, herself an articulate spokesperson who organizes the Sunday Coffee, Controversy & Conversation sessions started in 1972 under her husband’s ministry and an essential tool for educating River Roaders about the social injustices of the day.

River Road under Rev. Curtis and his wife continued to support a range of social action activities. Church discussions and events focused on public accommodations, housing for the poor, gun control laws, capital punishment, and reproductive rights. The Social Action Committee worked on the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and the May Day Peace March in 1971, turning the church into a soup kitchen, dormitory, and marshaling center for each event. Beginning in 1970, River Roaders gained updated information about these and other issues when the church started having a Social Responsibilities Committee table in the Fellowship Room on Sundays and an SRC section in the then weekly newsletter. The following year, to reflect the diversity of social action interests in the church, the Social Responsibilities Committee established subcommittees for education, environmental quality, legislation and political action, and peace.

Despite these successes and warm personal feelings toward Rev. Curtis by some of the church members, River Road entered a crisis period near the end of 1971. Membership continued to decrease and enrollment in the School of Religion dropped to below 200 students. Recruitment of teachers proved difficult, so the board switched to one session on Sundays and ended the Wednesday night services. Most pressing was the financial status of the church. The 1971 spring fund drive had been disastrous, leaving a \$12,000 deficit. Dan Lewis, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, called a special all-congregation board meeting on December 14, 1971. From this meeting came a series of evaluations and recommendations focused on Rev. Curtis’s ministry and the religious education program. Members wanted well-prepared sermons emphasizing ethical issues, Unitarian history, and comparative religions to attract back the disaffected members

while the religious education program should drop its arts-and-crafts approach, begun at the end of Muriel Davies's term, and have more structured and content-laden programs.

Thanks to the proactive steps by Dan Lewis, by 1973 the church began to attract members and gain some financial security. With a resurrected membership committee under Barbara and Morton Fosberg, old members were called and a new mailing list was compiled to build support for the church. New ways were pursued to finance the church, including rental uses, film series, theater benefits, musical concerts, lectures, and even a chess demonstration. The old bazaar also changed to address financial and social action concerns. Previous to Rev. Curtis's arrival, the bazaar had been a small sale of upscale clothing held in the Fellowship Room. Anne Rippey Edwards and others, who worked in the low-income day care center, recognized that these families needed practical everyday clothes and household items at reasonable prices. In response, the bazaar changed to include "all aspects of 'Grandma's attic,'" serving the church's financial needs while also helping the poor. As Edwards later noted, "the growth of the Bazaar from a simple sale involving a few women to a vast production which involved most of the congregation and many others from the community showed how effective Jim's call for parishioner participation could be. We became a lively congregation, helping others meet their needs at reasonable prices and what was left over after these early sales stocked a second-hand store in Adams Morgan for most of the year, bringing bargains to Washington as well."

With Rev. Curtis's death in 1973, River Road underwent a careful search for a new minister, calling Joyce Smith in June 1974 to begin serving in September. Rev. Smith put her energies into turning around the ministry and School of Religion, putting each on a firmer foundation. She left the administrative duties to the staff and the board. She began giving her sermons without notes. As James Yankauer recalled, "then there was the sermon by Joyce Smith in Clown makeup and costume canvassing the congregation for questions with an upturned umbrella. Never again did she stand at the podium and use written texts for her sermons." A series of special meetings on religious education beginning in 1975 tried to address the still dwindling enrollment and concerns of parents. A succession of RE directors since Muriel Davies's 1970 resignation had left the program without a constant source of leadership, further exasperating the problem. Finally, in 1977, Maud Benjamin was hired and in her nine-year tenure, she generated momentum to recruit teachers and offer a range of educational experiences for children and adults, including community worship services, mid-winter plays, a Secret Pal Society, and supervised trips and retreats for teenagers. In the area of social justice, RRUCers supported the Equal Rights Amendment through marches and fundraising and became involved in recycling, pollution, and conservation issues. In 1979, the Refugee Task Force sponsored a Vietnamese young couple and cousin, helping them move into their own apartment. A Cambodian woman also received help in finding housing. For the church, fund drives slowly met operating expenses, so that by December 1979, the pledge drive was only \$9 short of its goal.

Music at River Road also achieved some success in the late 1970s. The small choir that Mary Estelle Ellinwood had directed at Radnor Elementary School grew to 15-25 people under the direction of Jim Morrison. They sang from the balcony with accompaniment from a small upright piano. In 1968, when Morrison retired from his career job and moved, Mary Ellinwood came back to direct until George Phillips volunteered to become the Music Director. Phillips moved

the choir downstairs and adopted what Dan Lewis has characterized the “thundering herd” system of performance location that we presently use during Sunday services. Under Phillips, the choir grew to about 40 members and embarked on an ambitious performance schedule. Usually each spring, Phillips conducted a major choral work, bringing in a semi-professional orchestra along with extra singers and guest soloists. At Phillips’s instigation, River Road acquired its beautiful Steinway grand piano which the church, in 1999, had refurbished. In 1978, Phillips organized a musical tour of England and Wales for the choir and some additional River Road members. The choir performed several times, to much acclaim.

With the church achieving some success again, Rev. Smith left to become director of the Department of Ministerial and Congregational Services at the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in Boston. Another ministerial search resulted in the calling of Rev. William Murry in January 1981. Rev. Murry was strongly committed to social justice actions, and he often used the pulpit to educate the congregation about issues of particular concern to him. Early in his ministry, he advocated for the church to become a sanctuary for immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala. United States policy treated these people as economic refugees not entitled to temporary asylum, whereas Nicaraguan refugees were given legal status. Reports had found that El Salvadoran deportees had been persecuted and even killed once returned to their homelands. For moral and humanitarian reasons, Rev. Murry sought support beginning in 1983 from River Roaders to turn the church into a sanctuary, in open defiance to federal law. At a congregational meeting in April 1984, 52 members voted in favor and 36 in opposition to the sanctuary proposal. Brief reportage of this vote in the newsletter led to vociferous opposition from members, with some resigning and others attacking the substance of the idea and demanding that no action on sanctuary be taken unless a super majority of the congregation voted in favor. Rev. Murry, recognizing the tension the issue had brought, took a strong role in calming the storm by writing long columns in the newsletter and asking the social concerns committee to delay action on the proposal. Under Rev. Murry’s guidance, the church finally worked out a compromise in early 1985, whereby individual members of the Sanctuary Task Force would sign a pledge of moral commitment and legal responsibility, contribute funds, and lobby Congress, but the church as a whole would not be named or used. In May 1985, a Salvadoran refugee, Gustavo Cruz, began a five-month stay in the home of one of the task force’s members. The importance of asylum became even more clear when in 1989, word reached RRUC that Cruz had returned to El Salvador and had been imprisoned for working toward human rights in his homeland. With support from Congresswoman Connie Morella, the task force talked to the Salvadoran ambassador and gained amnesty for Cruz.

Challenging the congregation to confront its prejudices and work towards change were singular contributions of Rev. Murry. Dave Johnson remembered the minister’s annual Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday sermon in 1988, in which Rev. Murry confessed that “I am a racist” and said that he wanted to do something constructive to help change both himself and society. He invited others who shared his feelings to join him two weeks later to explore this issue. Approximately 50 people came to that meeting, with the end result being the formation of what have been two active task forces at the church: the Racial Justice Task Force and the Housing Task Force. At the start of the Gulf War, Margaret Paris attended what was scheduled to be a lay-led service with a comedy theme. Instead, the comedy service had been “ditched and Billy Murry and a member



debated the rightness of the war. I was impressed with Bill’s moral arguments — the very ones I was trying to find to words to express. I knew I had come to the right place.” Some River Roaders, however, did not share Rev. Murry’s opinions about the Gulf War. Recognizing this divergence, Rev. Murry displayed his characteristic smart tactics and adaptability by having individuals with opposing viewpoints present their beliefs the following Sunday.

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Did you know? . . . During Rev. Murry’s tenure at River Road, the congregation voted to become a Welcoming Congregation, to affirm and respect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Over the course of more than a year, the Open Church Task Force conducted an effective information program to raise the consciousness of members, and in March 1995, at a special congregational meeting, members voted overwhelmingly for this designation.  
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Many people did come and join the church, to the point that membership neared 600 by the mid-1990s. More significantly, members have taken an active role in River Road, with big jumps seen in worship attendance, religious education, and social justice participation. A sense of energy pervades the building, beginning with Rev. Murry’s time but continuing to the present. People are doing more things, and the church building, as a result, has felt a little more crowded. To address this rising usage, a 2020 Task Force, charged in 1995 with recommending modifications to the church building over the next 25 years, created an architectural plan to accommodate 800 adult members and 400 youths while maintaining the beauty and integrity of the existing building and grounds. The congregation instead voted to make the church totally accessible to the handicapped, adopting a more modest 5-year plan. After a successful capital campaign in 1997, funds were used to install an elevator and build ramps to make the pulpit and other areas accessible. Money also went towards air conditioning the auditorium and classrooms and expanding office space to accommodate the needed staff increases the larger membership required.

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Did you know? . . . Rev. Murry suggested our church motto, “A religious community with a warm heart, and open mind and a social conscience.”  
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One of Rev. Murry’s contributions to River Road was his assistance in recruiting and retaining key staff members. Early in his ministry at the church, Rev. Murry supported the push to hire a paid music director. Previously, this function had been completed on a volunteer basis. With George Phillips’s departure in the early 1980s, a full-scale search resulted in the hiring of Clifton Hardin. Hired initially on a quarter-time basis, Hardin has now become RRUC’s full-time music director. Whereas Phillips had chosen music based on his own program of showcasing major chorale works and had used taped recordings for the prelude, offertory, and postlude, Hardin shared Rev. Murry’s belief that music should be an integral part of each service and that live music should be used whenever possible. Hardin, a musician and composer who completed in 1999 his doctorate degree at the University of Maryland in choral arts, has written numerous choral pieces which the River Road choir has performed over the years. The most impressive of these has been Hardin’s

Unitarian Universalist-inspired Requiem, premiered in May 1993 and performed again in 1999. Hardin has brought to River Road his gentle manner but passion for excellence, clearly and thoughtfully pushing his growing adult and children's choirs to perform at their very best to an appreciative and supportive audience.

Two other key staff positions came from Rev. Murry's guiding hand. In 1993, the board of trustees hired Rebecca Birnie as first an assistant and now the chief church administrator. Rev. Murry helped direct the board to Birnie and then sold Birnie on the idea of coming to River Road. With Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Library and Information Science, Birnie has kept the church office running smoothly and efficiently. A year after Birnie's appointment, River Road, with Rev. Murry's guidance, found its current Director of Religious Education, Ginger Luke. Luke has distinguished herself at River Road because she puts the children's needs first. Religious education curriculum has flowered under her direction, with programs geared for all ages (even two-year olds!) to learn about Unitarian Universalist principles in a range of interesting and stimulating contexts. Her succinct and meaningful children's stories during the Sunday worship service have mesmerized both kids and adults. Parents feel welcome to discuss their concerns with Luke, and they also feel confident that their children are getting the religious education that they, as parents, envision. Enrollment in religious education continues to climb, at a rate faster than adult membership. The demographics of the baby boomlet, combined with Luke's ability to capture the interest of these younger families, has had a large role in fostering the growth RRUC currently experiences.

On May 28, 1997, Rev. Murry announced his departure from River Road to accept a call to be President and Academic Dean of Meadville/Lombard Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL. His lasting legacy to RRUC has been the strong foundation with which he left the church, both in its excellent staff of Hardin, Birnie, and Luke, and also in its lay leadership. Rev. Murry had fostered and encouraged the growth of many potential leaders in the church, which aided the congregation in its search for a new minister. Within a month of Rev. Murry's announcement, the board found an interim minister, Rev. John Burciaga, who had recently completed twenty years as minister of a Clearwater, FL UU church. In June 1998, River Road called Rev. Scott Alexander, who had most recently served as the Senior Minister of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. The author and editor of five books, Rev. Alexander has brought his missionary zeal to River Road, inspiring the increasing number of members to announce proudly their UU faith and convert the world to its example. The church continues to prosper under his ministry.