

HOW WE GOT HERE

A History of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Woodstock

By Patrick Murfin

At the close of the Civil War, there was a stirring in Woodstock, Illinois. Before the War the quiet McHenry County Seat had been settled by two of the great strains of pioneer stock in America. The Scots-Irish pushed west along or ahead of advancing frontier line from Virginia and the Carolinas through Tennessee, Kentucky and the Ohio River country into the Old Northwest. Most were staunch Presbyterians when they settled down in one place long enough to build a church and hire a minister.

The other great migration began of Yankee stock in Massachusetts and pushed progressively west, generation after generation through the Connecticut Valley and the Green Mountains into upstate New York. Via the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes they spread over the upper Mid West. Younger sons would pack up their families, leave their fathers' established farms and head incrementally west. Most were Congregationalists, but it was hard to get the learned Congregational preachers to leave the comforts of the east for the rigor of virtual frontier. So in Woodstock the displaced Yankees had been content to worship with their Calvinist cousins, the Presbyterians.

But the war changed things. Many of the Presbyterian Scots-Irish remained Democrats and their loyalty to the Union was questioned by some. So it was that returning Union veterans and other old Yankee Republicans felt it was time to separate from the "Copperheads" and form their own church. In October of 1865 a small group met in the old courthouse to consider forming a Congregational Church. On October 24th they met again to draft a constitution, formulate a covenant of faith, and elect leadership. Orville Page was elected chairman and Abner Bidwell was the first Clerk. The Rev. J.J. Dixon was called as the first minister and served for the first two years. The First Congregational Church of Woodstock was born.

While meeting in various locations around town, most notably Phoenix Hall, congregational leadership wasted no time in establishing a permanent home in the community. In March of 1866 a plot of land on Dean Street, two short blocks from the square, was purchased. Construction began immediately and at a cost of \$3000 a fine new wood frame church in the classic New England meeting house style was erected. The building was consecrated and occupied by Christmas, 1866. The new church boasted 450 seats, the most in town.

The large seating capacity proved unnecessary. Although the church quickly became an important part of community life, it never grew large and sometimes struggled. Throughout the remainder of the century it

often proved difficult to recruit and keep qualified ministers. A succession of recent seminary graduate and failed ministers from larger churches paraded through the pulpit at one or two year intervals. Between Rev. Dixon's departure in 1868 and Rev. Roy B. Guild who assumed the pulpit in 1896, 15 ministers served the congregation. Only Rev. E.B. Boggess, who served three and a half years from 1884 to 1888, stayed more than two years.

Strong lay leadership was the key to the success of the First Congregational Church in those years. Many of Woodstock's leading families including the Hoys, Wheats, McConnells and Wrights attended the church. Members of the church frequently served in City, township and country government and were leading members of the Republican Party. Another member was the long time editor of the local newspaper. Meanwhile the ladies of the church were very active in local charity work and some became interested in social reform. Prohibition and women's suffrage both found strong adherents among the Congregationalists.

By the 1890's church was in robust good health. In 1897 a parsonage was built next door to the church on South Street, which no doubt encouraged Rev. and Mrs. Guild to extend their ministry through 1900. By that time it became apparent that the old church, while large, was not suitable for modern usage. It was not built for modern amenities like electric lights and indoor plumbing and the single large meeting room in the New England style did not easily accommodate small group meetings or a thriving Sunday school.

Under the leadership of Rev. C.H. Bene funds were raised to erect a modern brick building. In 1906 the old building was torn down and the new building featuring a squat square tower and magnificent gothic arched stained glass windows was erected. Built on an unusual plan, the sanctuary was separated from a large open meeting room by sliding pocket doors. With the doors thrown open the floor of the open room became a stage for Sunday school pageants or amateur theatricals. Around the perimeter of the large room, smaller rooms could be created with folding doors for office space or Sunday school classes.

The new building also symbolized a break with the stricter tenets of traditional Calvinism. Not only was the New England meeting house style abandoned, so was Puritan austerity. Colorful stained glass windows in the German style featuring not only Jesus, but an almost Catholic depiction of Mary, would have been considered idolatrous to earlier generations. The magnificent pipe organ promised a more sensual worship.

The financial strains of building the new church helped call into being the congregation's most enduring organization. The Friendly Aid consolidated two earlier women's groups, the Ladies Aid made up of

mature matrons and the Friends in Council, a young mother group. The groups united to raise funds for the needs of the church and through the years sponsored a variety of imaginative events including dinners, entertainments, and sales. On more than one occasion the women of the Friendly Aid came through with much needed funds in emergencies. In the darkest days of the Depression they struggled to contribute one nickel each a week to keep the church, then financial floundering, afloat. On such a slender thread did the church's fortunes lie. Much later another women's group, The Evening League made up of working women and mothers of small children also consolidated with the Friendly Aid. The Aid also took responsibility for funeral arrangements including luncheons and flowers. Today the Friendly Aid is made up of the most senior women of the church. While not as physically active as they once were, they continue to care for the welfare of the congregation.

The Rev. William Kilburne reaped the fruits of Rev. Bene's work with a long ministry from 1909 through 1917. It was during these early years of the century that the First Congregational Church began to distinguish itself for its liberal religious presence in a conservative community.

The years after the First World War were difficult for the Church. Church attendance dropped dramatically across the nation in the wake of the disillusion caused by the war's carnage, scientific advances that seemed to negate revealed religion, and the wide open hedonism of the Roaring Twenties. The First Congregational Church was not immune. Thus it was in an already weakened state when the Great Depression hit throwing many members out of work. It became a desperate struggle just to pay the minister and keep enough coal on hand to keep the church from freezing on Sunday mornings.

Rev. William D. Pratt, who assumed the pulpit in 1932, was a pragmatist who recognized that the First Congregational Church needed to find new partners to survive. Other local churches were in no better financial condition. Negotiations were undertaken with the Presbyterians and Baptists to create a single Federated Community Church. Votes for this scheme carried the Congregational and Presbyterian churches but failed with the Baptists and the efforts collapsed.

Then, in 1937 former members of the defunct local Universalist Church who now worshiped at First Congregational remembered a \$5000 bequest set aside for the establishment of a new Universalist congregation in McHenry County. It was decided to seek joint fellowship with the Universalists and claim the bequest. Rev. Platt led a Committee of Negotiation including Belle Kimball, Mrs. Jesse Pfeiffer and Ralph McDonnell into discussion with the Fellowship Committee of the Illinois Universalist Convention. The church obtained dual fellowship on May 1, 1938 which included fellowship in the Universalist Church in America.

The name of the church was changed to the Congregational Universalist Church of Woodstock and the church was rescued from financial disaster.

Universalists, a liberal evangelical denomination which preached the doctrine of universal salvation and which was also largely Unitarian in theology, had deep roots in McHenry County dating back to the 1830's. Itinerant ministers and lay preachers frequently visited the county. Several short-lived congregations were started. Mary Ashton Rice Livermore and her husband began such a congregation in meeting rooms above a Woodstock tavern in the 1840's. Livermore went on to a significant career as a lay preacher, women's rights advocate, social activist and Civil War heroine. A stable Woodstock congregation was finally organized in September of 1855, a full ten years before the First Congregational Church. The Woodstock congregation persisted until about 1912.

Another McHenry County Universalist congregation was organized by Rev. James R. Mack in McHenry in January of 1853. That congregation built a simple frame meeting house the following year where it worshiped until the church closed in 1929. The building stands today, one of the oldest churches in the County. A Pentecostal congregation worships there now.

To cement relations with the Universalists, the congregation agreed to call a Universalist minister. Rev. Merton L. Aldridge held the pulpit longer than any other preacher before him, serving from December 1938 to January 1949. As minister during the war years he watched attendance climb with the uncertainty of the age.

The women of the church played a key role in the conflict. As early as 1939 they led the formation of a local chapter of the American Red Cross, an organization founded by Universalist Clara Barton. They were soon rolling bandages and conducting blood drives for the war effort. Through the Red Cross the churchwomen got a strong interest in health issues. They would go on to found and largely staff the Ladies Auxiliary to Memorial Hospital and some would later found Easter Seals of McHenry County.

War came early and hard to the Congregational Universalist Church. Thomas Lounsbury, the twenty-year-old son of leading church members Robert and Florence Lounsbury was killed on the battleship Arizona on December 7, 1941. He was the first McHenry County casualty of the war. The 48 star American Flag still carried to the Civil War monument in the Square for Memorial Day services every year was donated to the church in Lounsbury's memory.

The post-war years were good ones for the church. Membership grew as

young families joined the congregation and finances, although never totally secure, ceased to be an ongoing crisis amid the affluence of the post-war boom. But the congregation received a crushing blow when Rev. Aldridge died unexpectedly in January of 1949. Aldridge had been deeply loved and was considered a leader among Universalists despite spending his entire career in rather small country churches like the one in Woodstock. His widow long remained an active member of the congregation and a timely bequest at her death helped the church weather a latter financial crisis.

Only three ministers served the congregation in the 14 years after Rev. Aldridge's death-Rev. Leslie J. Tuck, 1949-1954; Rev. Robert C. Anderson, 1954-1957; and Rev. Weston A. Stevens, 1957-1963.

Services in those years were generally familiarly Christian in form, but the tone expressed the warm-hearted generosity of spirit associated with Universalism. The increasing interest in world religions among Universalists of the time also found its way into worship services. The author of a 100th anniversary monograph on the history of the church commented, "...both the congregation and ministerial leadership have deliberately minimized the use of denominational labels and classifications. This attitude has led to a certain inevitable weakness in denominational ties. However, to more than compensate for that, a strong sense of unity and harmony, so essential to an autonomous group such as this one, has been maintained and strengthened."

An important part of the worship experience in those years was provided by the extraordinary twenty-year tenure of Grant Nolan as music director. Frequently referred to as "an inspired musician", under his leadership the Adult Choir achieved a reputation as the finest in Woodstock.

Improved roads and the 1950's love affair with the automobile had its affect on the congregation. The church reached out beyond Woodstock for membership and gradually became more of a regional and less of a "town" church. Members began to drive in from McHenry, Crystal Lake and Harvard drawn by the unique message of liberal religion. Because Congregational churches were available in other towns, most of these new members were attracted by the Universalist identity of the church. Thus the long, slow process was under way by which the numbers identifying themselves as Universalists, and latter Unitarian-Universalists, gradually surpassed those of the founding Congregationalists.

Denominational realignments during these years had different affects on the congregation. In 1957 the Congregational Church in America with other Protestant denomination, notably Reform churches of German origin and some Brethren churches, to form a new denomination, The

United Church of Christ. The Congregation very narrowly voted to affiliate with the new denomination, with substantial numbers of members preferring to become an independent Congregational Church with continuing affiliation with the Universalists. Even after affiliation with the UCC, the congregation seldom called on the denomination for services or participated in denominational affairs.

On the other hand when the Universalist Church in America merged with the larger and more organizationally sound American Unitarian Association in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association it spelled major changes for the local church. The UCA and AUA were theologically close and had been flirting with affiliation for years. Universalism was a waning movement which retained a distinct Christian feel while the AUA was robust and growing and was then dominated by Humanist thought. But together, they made a major voice for liberal religion.

The Ministry of Weston Stevens from 1957 to 1963 symbolically bridged these years. Although ordained a Universalist, like many young ministers of his generation he shared much of the Unitarian outlook. Under his leadership, worship broadened to include more material from world religion sources and Humanism in addition to traditional Biblical and Christian sources. He also took a high visibility, activist roll in the community sitting on the boards of numerous local charities and leading the Woodstock Ministerial Association. He used his annual summer sabbaticals to travel widely in the world, bring back the riches of his experience to both worship and the community. The travel included one memorable trip to the Soviet Union to participate in the opening of an American exhibition there. He witnessed the famous "Kitchen Debates" between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev. On his return he became an advocate for people to people understanding, peace and disarmament. Stevens's dynamic leadership brought the church to it highest membership in decades.

After Stevens, came a succession of brief ministries. The first of these, Rev. John A. Dunn, had a brief but memorable one-year pastorate in 1964 and '65. Rev. Dunn was a former Catholic Priest whose growing doubts caused him to abandon his old faith and enter Mead Lombard, the Unitarian Universalist theological seminary in Chicago. There he earned a reputation as a scholar and a skilled preacher. Upon graduation the Congregational Universalist Church was his first ministry. After the murder of UU minister James Reeb during a voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, Rev. Dunn was one of more than 200 UU ministers to answer the call to march in protest with Dr. Martin Luther King. Over half of the denominations active ministry also responded to that call, which became the legendary high point of the new denomination's early years.

In October of 1965 the Congregation celebrated its 100th anniversary without a settled minister. Membership had dwindled to fewer than 100, but that included many adult children of older members who had moved away or no longer attended church. It was a decidedly graying congregation. Despite the celebration, for which the popular Rev. Stevens returned from New York to preach, the church was in serious trouble.

Neither the Rev. Charles C. Callahan, who served from March 1966 to August 1970, nor the Rev. Michael D. Smith, who occupied the pulpit from August of 1971 through September of 1974, was able to stem the decline of the congregation. By the end of Rev. Smith's ministry only a handful of the faithful, mostly elderly, regularly attended services. The church's expenses were often only met out of the pockets of church officers, particularly members of the Mather family.

With Smith's departure, it became apparent that something dramatic would have to happen or the Congregation was doomed. Younger members were convinced there was a place for a forthrightly liberal church in McHenry County. They felt that the growing artistic community in Woodstock would be a natural source of support. Helen Wright and other church members were leaders of the movement to preserve the Opera House and to make it a lively center for the arts. Painters, sculptors and visual artists were moving to Woodstock. A local folk music scene flourished.

At the same time, ecology awareness was growing in McHenry County. Local fights against landfills, gravel pits, and a proposed regional airport were heightening awareness and changing an old fashion conservation ethic into an ecology movement. This would lead to the founding of the Defenders and many of its early leaders either came from the congregation or joined it. Like wise there was a need for a home for dissenters from the county's conservative majority. Former war protestors, civil rights advocates, and activists of all stripes needed a spiritual home to ground them in their efforts.

Despite some misgivings, the church's lay leadership took a bold step with the hope of attracting a new generation. They went out and hired a woman. The Rev. Barbara Wuensch was a pioneer in the Unitarian Universalist clergy. Although both denominations had been among the first to ordain women in the 19th Century, the Unitarians had strongly discouraged women clergy to the point that less than 2% were women. With the rising of the women's movement in the 1960's demands for greater equity were unavoidable. Barbara Wuensch was among the first of a new crop of women to enter seminary and was among the first to get a permanent settlement as a parish minister. This congregation ordained her in 1975.

The new minister was young, energetic, enthusiastic and the perfect spark for a revival of the Congregation. Under her leadership the Congregational Universalist church was soon once again a lively place where young families joined the old established members. She became the Rev. Barbara Merritt after her marriage. Particular attention was paid to reviving the religious education program, which was soon filled with children and care was lavished on music. An articulate and gifted preacher, Rev. Merritt's sermons were noted for their exceptional intellectual depth and their literary quality. She often used poets such as T.S. Eliot and E.E. Cummings as the text for her talks. Like her predecessors, Rev. Merritt was very active in the community and gained considerable local notoriety for her patient advocacy for improved health services to the elderly as the leader of the county's Taskforce on Aging. Several congregational traditions began under Rev. Merritt's leadership. The Barn Service, held for many years at Helen Wright's barn, became an annual culminating celebration to the church year. The Tree of Life was adopted as a congregational symbol and was used in lieu of either a Christian Cross or the Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice. Chalice Lighting was introduced as an opening for religious services. Rev. Merritt's most long lasting contribution to the congregation, however, was in spearheading a reform of church stewardship. When she arrived there was no system of pledging. The congregation subsisted on Sunday morning collection plate offerings and on the timely bequests of elderly members. There was only a minimal annual budget. Regular shortfalls were made up by personal contributions of a hand full of church officers and elders. Rev. Merritt introduced an orderly budget system and instituted an annual pledge drive. Within a few years the church had for the first time in years achieved some financial stability.

In the early eighties the church's lively music program and members interested in theater came together to launch Paradise People, an annual musical review. The shows proved wildly popular. The first shows were benefits for the Church, later other community charities benefited as well. After a few years of being presented in the church, the show outgrew the building and was put on in the Woodstock Opera House. It evolved into a separate community project which finally split from the church, but church members including music director Kathy Bruhnke and master of ceremonies Larry Dille, continued with the show during its ten year run. They revived the concept in 1999, returning it to the church and a new annual musical review, Dille's Follies, was born.

After Rev. Merritt left in December of 1982, the church conducted a search to find new leadership which would continue to serve the growing congregation. In another daring move, church leadership tapped a young husband and wife ministerial team. The Rev. Stephen Churchill Washburn and the Rev. Dianne Arakawa began their ministry in August of 1983. From the beginning they were a popular choice. Both were kind and caring. Rev. Arakawa excelled in pastoral care and crafted

memorable worship experiences. Rev. Washburn was a gifted teacher in a small group setting, although some members felt he lacked strong pulpit skills.

In 1984, church leadership undertook a massive examination of the church's governance structure. The result was an entirely new set of bylaws which were adopted in May of that year and which have remained in force, with regular amendments since that time. The congregation also adopted a new covenant statement at that time which replaced explicitly Christian wording with more inclusive language.

The church also changed its name to the Congregational Unitarian Church. It was felt that few people understood what Universalism meant, but that many more were aware of Unitarianism. It was hoped the new name would help attract new members who were specifically searching for a UU Church. In that it was successful. From that point on almost all new members who joined the church expressing a denominational preference identified themselves as Unitarian Universalists.

A strong commitment to social justice was a highlight of these years. The church was deeply involved in community projects such as local food pantries. It also hosted inner-city youth who were brought to the county by the United Church of Christ's Pleasant Valley Farm retreat center. The congregation's most notable project, however, was becoming a founding site for the rotating PADS homeless shelter. The church was eager to offer its space as the Woodstock PADS sight. The city council, however, feared that a homeless shelter would attract undesirables from out of the county who would loiter, panhandle and resort to petty crime. First they demanded extensive upgrades of church facilities, particularly electrical systems and exit lights, which volunteers from the church promptly provided. Then they declared that a homeless shelter required zoning and licensing as a hotel and threatened to close the site by police force if the church opened it. Rev. Washburn was a strong advocate of opening the shelter regardless of the city. He rallied the Congregation in his most memorable sermon and the Church Council unanimously agreed to open the shelter anyway and dare the local authorities to raid the church. They won the gamble, the city backed down and the PADS shelter, which still uses the Church every Wednesday night in October through April, opened successfully.

The congregation also reached out to the fledgling Jewish Congregation of McHenry County, which held services in the church building until they were able to purchase a building for the synagogue in Ridgefield. In the late 1990's a new Reform Jewish congregation, Tikkun Olan, would also find a welcoming home, as would a Zen meditation group. The congregation often shared joint social events and worship services with

all of these groups.

An important change to the church's religious education program occurred in these years when Carol Alfus was selected as the new RE Director. Previously church school classes were conducted using both United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist curricula. Alfus felt that it was difficult to have a coherent program using both. She asked for and received permission to conduct the church school using UUA curricula.

After the first years, some dissatisfaction arose in the Congregation with Rev. Washburn. He had begun an adult Bible class early in his ministry. The class had proved popular, but as it progressed Washburn became more and more traditional and orthodox in his Christian theology. The content of his sermons began to take on an evangelical tone that offended some members, particularly those of Jewish origin and some of the humanists. A handful of them, including some congregational leaders were so offended that they left the church and founded an independent fellowship which continues to meet in members homes to this day. In addition his weak pulpit style did not meet the expectations of others who were used to sermons of high intellectual content strongly delivered. Although most people, even those dissatisfied with Rev. Washburn, admired Rev. Arakawa, the two were a team and it was impossible to retain one without the other. The Church Council reluctantly declined to renew either of their contracts.

Both, however, had strong supporters in the congregation and there was bitter division over the issue. Other members, dismayed by the rancor within the church community simply quietly dropped out of the church. The steady growth that church had been enjoying for the past 15 years screeched to a halt and membership plummeted to about eighty members. This period became so painful for everyone involved that for years few people would even speak of it.

In 1990 the church was in bad shape. It was without a minister, demoralized from internal strife, and in serious financial difficulty due to a significant loss in membership. In addition the church sanctuary was literally falling apart. There were gaping holes in the ceiling, damaged and cracked plaster and a dim lighting system. Maintenance on the sanctuary had been deferred for years while the congregation put most of its resources into ministerial salaries. Lay leadership stepped up, as they had during other periods between ministers, to provide often high quality worship experience, but new ministerial leadership was needed.

The Church Council determined that the congregation in its current financial condition could not afford the services of a full time minister. A search through UU channels was not successful. But the leadership found in McHenry County a former Presbyterian minister who had

undergone a crisis of faith. He had left the ministry to work first on Federal anti-poverty programs and later as a consultant to agencies providing health care to the poor. He had recently served the small Methodist congregation in his hometown of Alden and was known in the county as an activist on human rights issues. The Rev. Dan Larsen was offered the part time pulpit of the church and he accepted, even though he declared himself a spiritual "mugwamp" who was no longer sure just what he believed beyond a service to humanity ethic. As a condition of his employment, he promised to pursue ministerial fellowship with the UUA.

Rev. Larsen hit the ground running, from the beginning working many more hours than his part time status would suggest. He challenged the congregation to get its house in order by initiating a major capital campaign to renovate the sanctuary. With the proceeds of that campaign and by mortgaging the parsonage, the sanctuary was completely remodeled. The only snag was over the selection of the color scheme for the paint. Several schemes were offered, but the congregation was deeply divided over the color. That simple decision threatened the newfound unity of the congregation. The day was saved when the production company of the film GROUND HOG DAY asked to use the church for a wedding scene. They would pay for the paint, but demanded to select the colors. Not only did it save the church \$5000, but it also rescued it from internal strife.

Over the next few years Rev. Larsen would oversee other physical improvements to the church. The kitchen was remodeled, an access ramp for the disabled was added to the rear of the building, the window frames in the social room were replaced, the roof re-shingled, water damage to the Dean Street entrance repaired, the Church School space in the basement remodeled and refurbished, and the main corner entrance way restored and refurbished.

From the beginning Rev. Larsen's keen interest in social justice issues fueled the congregation's already strong commitment in the area. When the Gulf War broke out the Peace and Justice Committee led the county's only protest at a demonstration on Woodstock Square. The act was especially courageous in light of broad public support for the war and the generally conservative profile of the county.

Rev. Larsen was deeply committed to assisting the county's growing Spanish speaking population. He was a leader in the Hispanic Coalition which advocated on behalf of the largely disenfranchised population. Out of that group he helped form the Inter-Faith Peace and Justice Committee of McHenry County, later renamed the Inter-Faith Council for Social Justice, to bring together the social justice ministries of local churches. Over the years that group would undertake a wide variety of projects including raising funds for the victims of the Rwandan civil war

to education programs on issues like health care and the North American Free Trade Act. Most of the organization's work, however, was in the area of human rights. Led by Rev. Larsen and other members of the congregation, the organization began the annual Peace and Justice Festival on Woodstock Square as an alternative event to a local rally by the Ku Klux Klan. The festival continued on as Diversity Day. The Inter-Faith Council also lobbied for the creation of local governmental Human Relations Commissions, supported English as a second language program in local schools, fought restrictive housing policies, and awarded college scholarships for minority students. After responding to a series of local hate crimes, the Council instituted the Stamp Out Hate program.

Rev. Larsen also streamlined the charitable responses of local churches by founding the Woodstock Area Community Ministry. WACM, composed of local congregations, sponsored the Direct Assistance program to plug holes in local social service agency programs and began a program for revolving loans for housing security deposits and small business start ups for the poor. Later WACM also assumed administrative responsibility of Woodstock PADS services. Larsen also founded the McHenry County Action Corp. which originally hoped to provide low income housing, but later developed a program to provide donated automobiles to the needy.

Along with members of the church's Peace and Justice Committee, Rev. Larsen became known as a strong public advocate on a wide range of issues including reproductive choice, health services to the poor, gun control, ethics in government, and recognition of Gay rights. The church's high profile on these issues helped attract more like-minded members who admired its courage and sought its community.

Meanwhile Rev. Larsen pursued fellowship with the UUA. After completing studies at Meadville-Lombard Seminary, he was accepted for preliminary fellowship. The congregation ordained him as a Unitarian Universalist minister in November of 1995. Two years later he received his final fellowship at the Service of the Living Tradition at the UUA General Assembly in Phoenix.

The congregation was also seeking new ways to meet the spiritual, social and intellectual needs of its members. Two women's programs, Cakes for the Queen of Heaven and Call Her Name helped introduce more earth centered spirituality to the worship mix on Sunday mornings. A men's group was formed and held a series of retreats. The Friday Night Salon Series of European style discussions explored a wide variety of social, scientific, political, economic, literary, and philosophic issues. Rev. Larsen's Building Your Own Religion courses became a popular introduction to the church's liberal religious philosophy. These and other programs attracted new members and helped other integrate into the congregation.

The congregation's church school program was also thriving and expanding. Carol Alfus introduced a two-year coming of age program for junior high students. Alfus's tenure was followed by a controversial two-year term by an aspiring ministry student, Lindsey Halpern-Givens. Although she enjoyed some successes, most notably test piloting the new UUA sex and life style education curriculum, Our Whole Lives, personality clashes with Rev. Larsen led to her resignation. A few members, including some who had been very active, believed she had been ill-used and resigned from the church. The controversy did not, however become a major split and most of the Church rallied behind Larsen and new RE Director Sue McCowin. Under McCowin's leadership the Church School program has experienced rapid growth as more young families have joined the Church.

The congregation was rebounding strongly under Rev. Larsen's leadership. The building was abuzz with activities almost every night. Membership was approaching double that of the nadir year of 1990 as the congregation neared the millennium. It was time to bring Rev. Larsen, who had long worked many more hours than he was paid for, up to full time status. Strong pledge drives and careful planning by the Church Council succeed in bringing him on full time for the 1999-2000 church year.

At the same time Larry Dille led a congregation wide effort to develop a mission statement for the church. Using small group discussions and other techniques virtually every member participated in the project and energized the whole congregation. The Mission Statement was adopted unanimously in May of 2000.

Coincidentally the church's self examination process raised the issue of continued dual affiliation with the UCC and the UUA. Although members identifying themselves as Unitarian Universalists had long been a substantial majority of the congregation, previous attempts to address the issue of inequitable denominational support had failed out of respect for the congregations traditions and the feelings of the remaining Congregationalists. But now less than a dozen of more than 175 members identified themselves with the UCC, yet nearly half of the congregation's denominational contributions went to that body. The UUA, its Central Mid-West District or the Chicago Area Council were providing virtually all services to the congregation. Rev. Larsen initiated careful discussions on the affiliation issue. All points of view were heard and respected. It was discovered that the Congregationalists did not have deep ties to the UCC but wanted assurances that their traditions would continue to be respected, that Christianity remain a part of the worship mix, and that the name of the Congregation remain the same. Those conditions were easily met and at the May 2000 Congregational meeting members voted unanimously to end affiliation with the United

Church of Christ and to become an unequivocally Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Today the church is thriving. Membership continues to grow. New opportunities for service and learning are continually being developed. The Congregation is in the midst of a Welcoming Congregation program which is reaching out to the Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender communities and seeking new ways to serve and include the county's growing Hispanic population. Despite challenges created when the 2001 pledge drive failed to boost revenues enough to meet the demands of a growing church, church leadership continues to plan for the future. New fundraising sources will have to be identified and some expansion of the Church's facilities in the near future is inevitable.

The Congregation marches toward the 100th anniversary of its church building and 140th anniversary as a church confident in an exciting future.

On July 12, 2009 the Congregational Unitarian Church officially became the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Woodstock. The Congregation voted to change the name at its May 2009 Spring Congregational meeting. It is the fourth name for the church, which has occupied the corner of Dean and South Streets since being founded by returning Civil War veterans in 1866 as the First Congregational Church of Woodstock.

In 1984 members of the congregation, following the consolidation of the Universalists nationally with the American Unitarian Association in 1961 creating the Unitarian Universalist Association, voted to change the name of the church to the Congregational Unitarian Church. At the time members felt that the public better recognized and understood the name Unitarian than Universalist

Both originally liberal Christian denominations, the Universalists believed that a loving God saved all souls—universal salvation—and the Unitarians believed in the unity of God—no Trinity—and an approach to faith based on reason. Modern Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion that honors not only its Judeo-Christian heritage, but draws from world religious and philosophic traditions to assist members in “building their own religion.” Those traditions are reflected in striking windows installed in the church as part of the Centennial of the current landmark church building in 2006.

Since the congregation ended its official affiliation with the United Church of Christ (the Congregationalists) in 2000 and became an exclusively Unitarian Universalist congregation, there has been talk of changing the name to reflect the new reality. “We really are happy to reclaim our lost Universalist identity,” Rev. Larsen said. “We say that ‘love is the doctrine of this church’ and Universalism calls us to put love into action.” By changing from Church to Congregation, “the new name also reflects that

we are a religious community, and not just a brick and mortar building while honoring our roots as Congregationalists.”

As the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Woodstock, the church continues its tradition of service to the community, which includes hosting PADS and the Woodstock Community Ministry’s Direct Assistance Program and outreach to the Latino community, and the advocacy for peace, justice, and a sustainable world which has been our hallmark. We hope to grow spiritually as a religious community living out the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism.