

# THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF LITTLE ROCK

## A BRIEF HISTORY

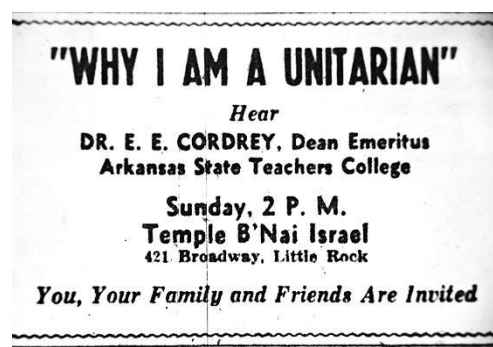
The seeds of liberal religion that ultimately grew into the Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock were sown by Universalists around 1900 when a Universalist congregation was active in Little Rock for almost twenty years. In the 1930s, the Unitarians looked into forming a Unitarian church but did not find sufficient interest at that time. However, after WWII the climate was more favorable, and this time the Unitarians were successful in establishing a foothold in Little Rock in the form of a Unitarian Fellowship.

[For more information on the earlier roots of Universalism see Appendix I at the end of this document. The presidents of the congregation from its beginning to the present day are listed in Appendix II.]

### UUCLR's BEGINNINGS – THE FELLOWSHIP YEARS

#### 1950 – 1959

In response to ads soliciting interest in Unitarianism placed in the Little Rock newspapers in the late summer and fall of 1950, several latent Arkansas Unitarians, including Dr. E. E. Cordrey and Felix Arnold, organized a meeting on Sunday, October 15, 1950, at Temple B'Nai Israel in Little Rock. Dr. Cordrey spoke on "Why I Am a Unitarian." Two weeks later, when the Reverend R. B. Gibbs, Regional Director of the Southwestern Unitarian Conference, spoke to the group on "Faith Without Fear," around sixteen persons had signed the membership book. This number was sufficient for the group to apply for affiliation with the American Unitarian Association (AUA), and on October 30, 1950, the Little Rock Unitarian Fellowship formally came into being.



#### CHARTER MEMBERS

Mrs. R. H. Ahrens	Mr. and Mrs. Yandell Johnson
Miss Dorothy Arnett	Mr. John H. Kimball
Mr. Felix Arnold	Mr. and Mrs. Max Levine
Mrs. Marion Brown	Mr. John Marable
Mr. and Mrs. Paul E. Bruce	Mr. Oscar Mosey
Mrs. Shirley Chevalier	Mr. and Mrs. William P. Murphy
Dr. E. E. Cordrey	Mr. F. A. Post
Mr. and Mrs. J. Paul Craig	Mr. S. P. Robinson
Mrs. Mary Douglas	Mrs. H. A. Schmieding
Mr. Orville Farquharson	Mr. and Mrs. M. W. Shelton
Mr. Douglas L. Hall	Mr. Joe Udes
Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Henderson	Mr. Warren S. Watkins

With its small group of charter members, the Little Rock Fellowship held together and slowly grew, passing around the leadership responsibilities, arranging weekly services at the Sam Peck Hotel, and setting up a Sunday school. By June of 1951, the official membership was up to 28. The fellowship, formed for the purpose of study, worship, and service, found early on that practicing freedom of thought had its pitfalls as well as its blessings. One of the struggles of the early congregation was the question of

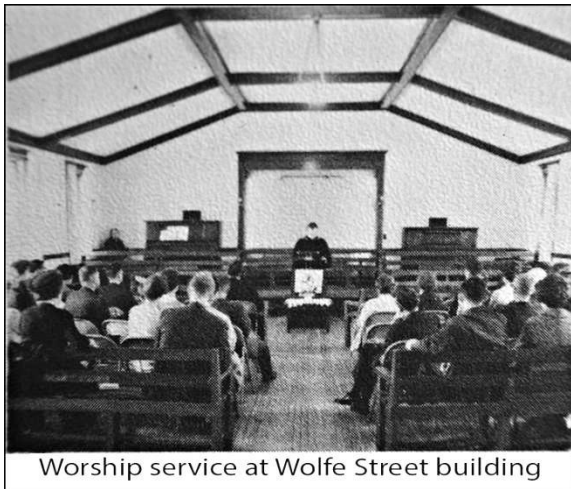
whether the weekly services were to involve "worship" or be simply rational presentation and discussion. This dispute was symbolized, according to charter member Yandell Johnson, by debate over whether a candle should be placed near the podium during services.

Another more divisive controversy soon followed, largely due to a weak organizational structure and the diverse reasons that had brought people to the group in the first place. Some of the first members were primarily interested in intellectual discussion of ethical and religious subjects, whereas others were focused on social and political action in the community (particularly on the issue of racial integration in the very segregated environment that existed in Little Rock in 1951), and still others had joined desiring more traditional religious and church activities.

A serious struggle developed between the social action faction and the more conservative group that sought to explore ethical and religious discussion; it came to a head over the formation of a local chapter of the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice (UFSJ). The UFSJ program consisted of a series of documentary films and discussions on such issues as socialism and peace. In association with Georg and Wilma Iggers, social activists and Philander Smith College professors, these programs involved the active participation of Black students from Philander Smith. This was a daring, if not illegal, activity in 1953 that some fellowship members felt was moving too fast and could jeopardize the establishment of Unitarianism in Little Rock. The non-segregation issue, as it was called then, aggravated the other long-standing philosophical and personality differences in the congregation, and feelings ran high. In November of 1953, the Rev. Philip Schug, Assistant Regional Director in Charge of Fellowships for the AUA, consulted with the fellowship and recommended that rather than being a social action group, its focus should be on "a church school, upon matters of a Sunday morning service, and upon the social programs that go with religious organizations." [Gibson 2015, p.223] Ultimately, his recommendations were followed; the UFSJ was soon gone and some of the more activist members with it.

This had been a painful struggle for the small congregation. Good people on both sides left disheartened, but the fellowship survived. New leadership emerged and changes were made to the governing structure. New members joined. It was a fresh beginning. Several hopeful signs at the end of 1953 were the creation of a building fund, the start of a monthly newsletter to replace the weekly postcards, and the prospect of obtaining a student minister to conduct Sunday services. In July 1954 the first newsletter was printed; it announced that Carl Whittier, a second-year divinity student at Harvard and a participant in the AUA's student minister program, would be conducting services for the next six weeks. His arrival marked the beginning of a new period for the fellowship.

Although membership growth had been slow through the first few years, the Religious Education (RE) program had shown steady gains since the first classes with 8 children were held in February 1952. By 1954-55 there were 25 children enrolled, a substantial number compared to an adult membership of only 45. The addition of young families with children throughout these



Worship service at Wolfe Street building

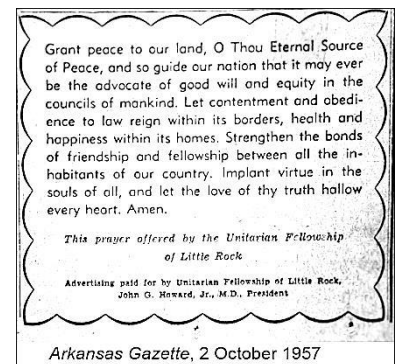
early years (these were "baby boom" families that member Ruth Bell noted typically had 2 to 5 children) brought new energy to the fellowship and greatly shaped its growth and dynamic. The need for more Sunday school space prompted a move in June 1955 from the Disabled American Veterans Clubhouse at 415 West 18<sup>th</sup> to the American Legion building on the southeast corner of 24<sup>th</sup> and Wolfe streets. The Sunday school met downstairs in the half-basement. Movable partitions were set up each Sunday to divide the large room into five classrooms, and a windowless closet served as the nursery. The adult morning services were held upstairs. The congregation would make this space home for nearly ten years.

After settling in on Wolfe Street, the fellowship focused on the goals of calling a minister and achieving the growth necessary for church status. From the 45 members at the beginning of 1955, the fellowship counted a total of 83 by the spring of 1957. Continued progress, however, necessitated calling a minister, and in July 1957 fellowship president Dr. John Howard appointed a pulpit committee. The AUA in Boston was supportive and pledged \$1200 toward the \$6500 salary for the first year. The search began, but the timing was unfortunate as the city was in the throes of the school desegregation crisis.

This period of turmoil for Little Rock, from the fall of 1957, when nine Black students attempted to attend Little Rock Central High, through the intervention by Federal troops, through the closing of the high schools in 1958-59, brought tough times for the Unitarian fellowship. The hateful voices of segregation spoke loudly, and liberal or even open-minded opinions could have repercussions. As individuals, fellowship members often took action (for example, 25 women associated with the fellowship joined the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, a proportionate response unimaginable in any other religious organization in the city with the possible exception of Temple B'nai Israel). However, the small fellowship as a group didn't feel able to do very much without a minister, although in June 1956 the congregation had adopted a resolution stating:

Unitarians are on record as desirous of facilitating the process to non-segregation in our American public schools and the full recognition of the rights of all minority groups in our democracy. Therefore the Little Rock Unitarian Fellowship wishes to state that, as concerned citizens of Arkansas, we accept the decree of the Supreme Court regarding segregation in the public schools." [Gibson, 2015, p.225]

In October 1957 President John Howard (despite the risk this posed to his newly established psychiatric practice) openly signed and submitted the fellowship's "prayer for peace" to the newspaper where it ran next to an ad from the city's ministerial alliance. The membership also supported Dr. Howard's participation in a bi-racial effort to provide scholarships for Black and white students who "promoted peace and harmonious relationships" during the crisis.



The fellowship was definitely hurt by the turmoil, both as individual families and as an organization. Membership declined by about 10 percent, a long-term lease for the American Legion Building was denied since that group feared that the fellowship would be integrated, and the ministerial search failed. Only one of the ten prospects considered was interested, and he accepted another church in the meantime. It was at this discouraging juncture, in December 1957, that the Reverend Charles A. Wing came as an interim minister to help the fellowship learn how to plan for growth and how to present a stronger, more appealing image to ministerial candidates. Wing accomplished his mission during his five-month stay, and a year later in 1959 the congregation called its first settled minister. Though the previous two years had been filled with frustration and struggle for the young congregation, it had also been a pivotal time in the maturity of the fellowship.

## THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. RICHARD W. KELLEY 1959 – 1967

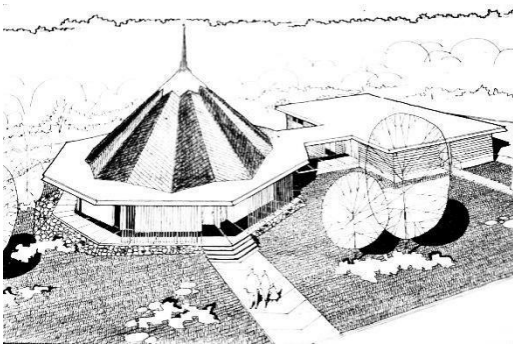
On March 5, 1959, Rev. Richard W. Kelley was called to be the church's first settled minister. The 33-year-old Kelley, a native of Rockford, Illinois, had graduated from the Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, in 1955 and came to Little Rock after serving four years at the Unitarian church in Newburgh, New York. With Rev. Kelley's installation on January 26, 1960, the congregation began to look forward again. Shortly, a plan was set in motion to accomplish the ambitious goals of substantially increasing membership, gaining financial stability, achieving church status, and moving the church into its own building. By the spring of 1961 the fellowship had met the goal of 65



Rev. Richard W. Kelley

families (106 individuals) needed to attain church status, and by June the newly merged Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) recognized the group as the UU Church of Little Rock.

That same spring the congregation moved closer to its building goal when a 2.3 acre lot on Reservoir Road was purchased. Within a year the property mortgage was paid off, and by early



1963 the church had begun a building fund drive. In 1964, the congregation approved the design of the new buildings, an octagonal sanctuary and two-story multi-purpose building, and construction began. By January 1965, construction was complete and the then 110-member congregation had settled into its own church home, which Rev. Kelley commented "symbolizes for us both security and opportunity. Security from the pressures and threats of a not-always-friendly community. Opportunity to establish a truly liberal center..., a radiating point of progressive influence reaching out into the life of Little Rock.... It is a

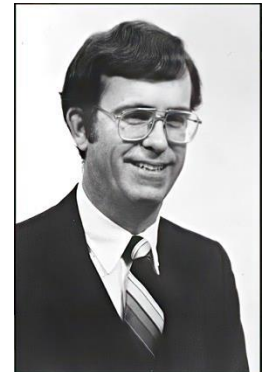
tribute to what a few truly dedicated and determined people can do." Later that month, a dedication service was held under the auspices of UUA president, the Rev. Dana Greeley.

Programing also expanded during this period: a discussion group known as Great Digressions began; the Unitarian Forum, open to the community, flourished through 1965 and 1966; the Women's Alliance was formed in 1965; and a Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) group was formed in 1966. The church also became more active in the Southwestern Unitarian Universalist Conference. In January of 1967, after seven years in Little Rock, Rev. Kelley left to accept the pulpit in Los Alamos, New Mexico. At Kelley's departure, the board acknowledged the "freshness, originality, and poetic quality" of his sermons and passed a resolution praising his leadership and inspiration.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. FRED F. CAMPBELL**

### **1967 – 1975**

Rev. Kelley was succeeded in August 1967 by Rev. Fred Campbell. As a recent graduate of Meadville Lombard Theological School, Rev. Campbell was newly ordained and eager to enter the parish ministry. He had a personable and caring manner and was immediately well liked in the church and in the community. During Rev. Campbell's eight years of stewardship, the congregation became increasingly active in community affairs, and Fred was accepted into the Little Rock Ministerial Alliance (his predecessor had resigned from the group after being stripped of his voting privileges for being insufficiently "evangelical"). He was also active in the Council on Human Relations.

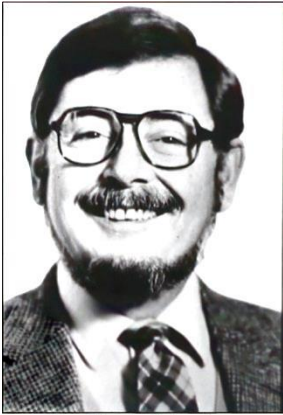


Rev. Fred F. Campbell

During the 1970s, the membership was very active in the women's movement: UUCLR elected its first woman as its president; both co-chairs and the majority of the leadership of the Coalition to Ratify the Equal Rights Amendment were members of the congregation; and the chair of the Women's Political Caucus was also a member. Christmas Eve candlelight services began, as did Dinners for Eight, later called Small Group Dinners. A square dance group and a singles' group were active, and the Labor Day "Goat Roast" to start off the church year became a yearly fellowship event. Membership continued to increase and was around 180 when Rev. Campbell accepted a call to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, in August 1975.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. GERALD D. SYLVESTER**

**1975 – 1982**



Rev. Gerald Sylvester

The Rev. Gerald Sylvester, a new graduate of the Thomas Starr King School for the Ministry in California, entered the ministry after a career as a naval officer. He accepted the call to UUCLR and arrived in Little Rock with his wife Maria, their daughter and son in February 1976. During his tenure, the church continued to participate in many social action activities, such as feminist causes and the annual hunger walk. The Metropolitan Community Church that served the gay and lesbian community began meeting at UUCLR on Sunday afternoons. Gerry was a good administrator and the church's governmental and financial structure were strengthened and improved, which made it possible to hire a Religious Education director and an office administrator, both on a part-time basis. The UU Film Society, which showed foreign and avant-garde films, was established and continued for more than 20 years. The Endowment Fund was established, an octagonal "gazebo" was built, and a new playground area was built for

RE, as well as other physical improvements that added to the appearance of the church and grounds. Church membership continued to grow, reaching the 200 mark.

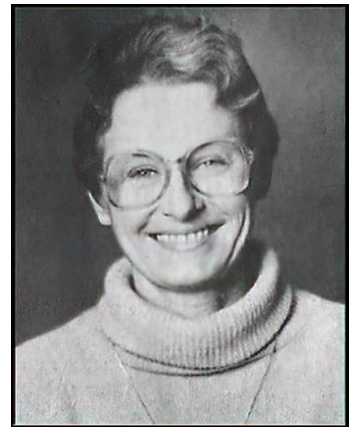
After Gerry Sylvester resigned in March 1982, Carl Wartenburg, a faculty member at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, served as a part-time interim minister. UUCLR ordained Wartenburg in 1980, although he was never admitted to fellowship as a UU minister.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. JEAN M. RICKARD**

**1983 – 1992**

Ordained in 1981, Rev. Jean Rickard was the first woman to serve as minister of UUCLR, arriving in February 1983. She, her husband David, and their two school-age sons moved to Little Rock from Massachusetts where she had attended Andover Newton Theological School and where she had gained valuable experience as a religious educator. Living in the Boston area, both Jean and David had strong connections to the denomination.

Under her leadership the church grew both physically and in the eyes of the community as well as the denomination. Programs and activities thrived, but the church's building space began to feel cramped and limiting. A successful capital campaign was held to add a fellowship hall and church offices to the existing campus, enlarge the sanctuary, and remodel the Religious Education building. For six months while the sanctuary was being redone, the congregation held services in the chapel of St. Vincent's Infirmary. The new and renovated buildings were dedicated in February 1987.



Rev. Jean Rickard

In June of 1987, UUCLR was the host church for the UUA General Assembly, which brought 2000 UU's from around the country and Canada to discover the out-of-the-way city of Little Rock, Arkansas. The delegates enjoyed a week of workshops, worship, fellowship, and denominational business at the downtown convention center and hotels overlooking Riverfront Park. This was a major undertaking for the Little Rock church that involved three years of planning and the recruitment of around 180 volunteers both locally and across the Southwest District. Its success

enhanced UUCLR's presence not only in the denomination but also in the eyes of the community and the state.

As part of its Social Responsibility program, the congregation established a R.A.I.N. team (Regional AIDS Interfaith Network) and a partnership with the Garland Elementary School. Also, UUCLR members and friends began serving dinners at the Our House homeless shelter, support which continues to the present. During this period, many members of UUCLR were active in supporting Planned Parenthood and a woman's "right to choose." Church families and friends also began floating the Buffalo River together on Memorial Day weekend, a tradition which for many has become a highlight of the church year.

In 1990-91, Rev. Rickard was the first UUCLR minister to take a sabbatical. In 1992, she resigned to take up the ministry of the Neshoba UU Church in Cordova, Tennessee, until 2005 when she retired as the Rev. Jean M. Rowe.

### **THE INTERIM MINISTRY OF THE REV. FERN C. STANLEY**

**1993 – 1994**



Rev. Fern Stanley

UUCLR spent the months until September 1993 without professional leadership. The church was lay-led and the Worship Committee filled the pulpit with interesting speakers. With the help of the Rev. Jim Eller of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who provided some part-time consultation, the congregation created new mission and covenant statements and a search committee was formed. The board hired Rev. Fern Stanley, an Accredited Interim Minister who during her ministerial career provided interim services to 13 congregations, to help UUCLR get back on track. She was in Little Rock from September 1993 to August 1994. In April of 1994, the congregation called Rev. Jo Ellen Willis to be its fifth settled minister.

### **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. JO ELLEN WILLIS**

**1994 – 2002**

The Rev. Jo Ellen Willis earned her Master of Divinity degree from Drew University Theological School in 1992 and had experience as a religious educator and as an interim minister when called by UUCLR. Jo Ellen and her husband Doug Rose and their son Jamie arrived in Little Rock in August 1994, and she quickly became active in the community. She represented UUCLR on the newly formed Interfaith Alliance, where she led the disaster recovery team that responded to the destruction caused by tornadoes that struck Central Arkansas, and on the Council for Diversity, which attempted to provide accurate information about all religious traditions following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. She also served on the board of Planned Parenthood of Greater Arkansas and volunteered at Garland Elementary.



Rev. Jo Ellen Willis

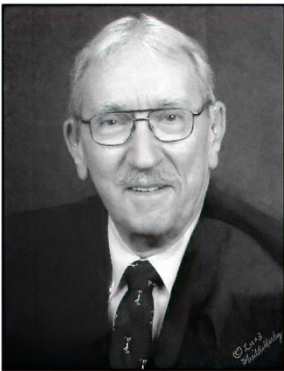
During her eight years as minister, the congregation paid off the mortgage that financed the 1986 expansion and renovation; expanded the RE program including a full-time RE director; established Covenant Groups and a Young Adults group; and advocated for gay rights. In 1997

after the mortgage for the addition was paid off, the fellowship hall was named Thomson Hall in honor of Ben and Mary Thomson, whose leadership and long service in financial stewardship and social responsibility were major contributions to the church's stability and growth.

A special holiday celebrating Unitarian Universalism called Illumination, which had been developed by members Venita and Ben Lovelace-Chandler and the RE Committee became an established tradition and continues to be observed each year. Other UU congregations have also adopted the celebration. The Endowment Fund grew significantly with a large bequest that enabled it to become a major contributor to the church budget. The congregation hosted the SWUU district women's conference in February 2000 and celebrated UUCLR's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October of 2000.

## **THE INTERIM MINISTRY OF THE REV. ALEXANDER (SCOTTY) MEEK**

**2002 – 2004**



Rev. Scotty Meek

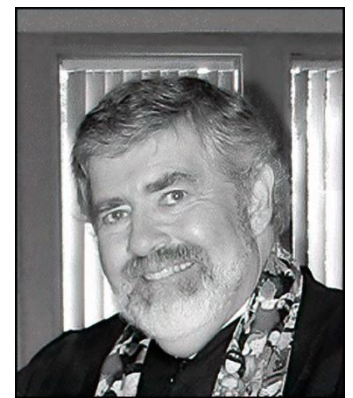
After Rev. Willis resigned in 2002, the church chose as interim Rev. Scotty Meek, a veteran minister with over 40 years of experience in leading a wide range of congregations. When the ministerial search of 2003 called a candidate who found he was unable to accept the position, Rev. Meek's interim appointment was extended another year. His positive and friendly demeanor and gentle leadership through a difficult period led the congregation in 2004 to name him as the first Minister Emeritus of UUCLR when he retired. A second ministerial search was successful, and Rev. Bob Klein was called in 2004 to be the church's sixth settled minister.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. ROBERT J. KLEIN**

**2004 – 2013**

Beginning his ministerial career as a Methodist, Rev. Bob Klein recognized his calling as a UU in the mid-1990s and served UU churches in Pennsylvania and California before beginning his settled ministry in Little Rock in August, 2004. His installation was held on November 17, 2004. For the first few years, Rev. Bob's wife, Rev. Jane Bechle, served as an Affiliate Minister.

During Rev. Bob's tenure, plans were made to move the congregation from a "pastoral type" to a "program type" church. This effort included the creation of a congregational covenant called "At Peace Among Ourselves," the creation of strategic plans, and a new governance structure, which included a Program Council and greatly revised Articles of Incorporation, Bylaws, and Rules and Regulations. The congregation also moved to a "Second Hour Church" model on Sunday mornings, with Religious Education for all ages at 10 a.m. and worship for all ages at 11 a.m.



Rev. Bob Klein

Amid this process, the congregation began many new programs and activities, such as outreach to the Community Correction Center, Young at Heart, UUCLR Presents, Pilgrims and Strangers, and Second Sunday vegetarian potlucks. The congregation beautified the Memorial Woodlands,

became an official Welcoming Congregation, began the annual Blessing of the Animals service, started a drumming circle, and issued congregational resolutions on peace and social justice. Young adults' activities flourished and a long-established recycling program was strengthened.

The Cornerstone Society was established to honor long-time members whose leadership was distinguished. UUCLR's relationship with the District and the UUA remained strong; the church hosted a district conference, sent members to UU leadership schools, trainings, and gatherings, and celebrated its sixtieth anniversary.

Rev. Bob recognized the increased "spirituality" at UUCLR and in UUism generally. He observed that, as younger generations come to leadership at UUCLR and throughout the movement, there is a much stronger interest in spirituality and meaningful relationships. Rev. Bob's ministry for UUCLR was distinguished by advocacy to abolish the death penalty, building relationships with the Turkish community, supporting PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and outreach to the low-income population of Little Rock. In 2013, Rev. Bob resigned from UUCLR and became the settled minister in Stockton, California.

### **THE INTERIM MINISTRY OF THE REV. JENNIE BARRINGTON**

**2013 – 2015**



Rev. Jennie Barrington

In August of 2013, Rev. Jennie Barrington, an experienced interim minister, began her two-year service at UUCLR. This two-year Intentional Interim Period focused on examining and strengthening the congregation as a whole, including its programs, religious education, pastoral care, facility needs, meaning of membership, mission and purpose, and governance structure.

During this interim, the church engaged in all its customary activities: celebration, worship, and caring. Musical and choral programs, OWL classes (Our Whole Lives, an age-appropriate sexuality education curriculum), and thoughtful discussions in many forums flourished. Rev. Jennie's ministry will be remembered particularly for the twelve legal same-sex marriages she performed in the Pulaski County Courthouse on May 12, 2014.

### **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. JAN K. NIELSEN**

**2015 – 2022**

After 13 years as minister of the Universalist Church of West Hartford, Connecticut, Rev. Jan Nielsen accepted the call in May 2015 to be UUCLR's seventh settled minister. In so doing, she returned to her native state of Arkansas where she had received her education and practiced law before attending Harvard Divinity School and receiving ordination as a UU minister.

Rev. Jan, her husband Roger Jeremiah, and their children arrived in Little Rock in August, 2015, and were welcomed by the congregation and the community. Sunday services soon reached capacity in the original sanctuary, so it was decided to refashion the larger and more flexible



Rev. Jan Nielsen

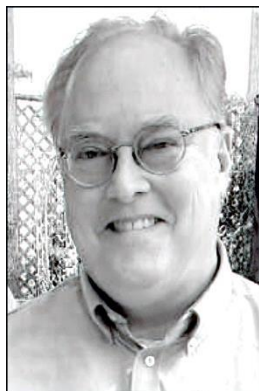
Thomson Fellowship Hall into a temporary worship space. Community programs that put members' "Faith in Action" included volunteering at The Van, which organizes and distributes donations for those experiencing homelessness, Stephens Food Pantry, Our House Meals, and a prison ministry. After a year of study on the UUA's proposal to add an 8<sup>th</sup> Principle to the denomination's core values that would explicitly address the racism existing in our institutions and culture, the congregation voted in June 2022 to affirm the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle.

A successful capital fund campaign in 2018-19 enabled the congregation to embark on plans to expand the original worship space, renovate the Religious Education wing, and make improvements to Thomson Hall. In the spring of 2020, due to the covid-19 virus pandemic UUCLR had to close its buildings and conduct services and meetings using online video conferencing platforms. Rev. Jan returned from her sabbatical to full-time ministry in order to lead the church through an unusual and difficult time, conducting online services and helping church members and friends stay connected. During the almost 21 months the church was closed, work continued on the renovation and expansion of the buildings. A host of dedicated church members devoted countless hours to getting the many aspects of this major project accomplished successfully and without going into long-term debt. It was a joyful congregation that returned to its more spacious and inviting church home. The new and renovated buildings and grounds were dedicated in a special service on May 15, 2022, in conjunction with the celebration of UUCLR's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which had had to be postponed from 2020.

After seven years as UUCLR's minister Rev. Jan announced her retirement from full-time ministry at the end of June 2022. Appreciative of her loving leadership during these years of great disruption and change, the congregation voted to honor her with the title of Minister Emerita.

## **THE MINISTRY OF THE REV. PAUL R. BEEDLE**

**2023 –**



Rev. Paul Beedle

The search committee selected to find an interim minister after Rev. Jan's departure came up empty handed. The board then decided on another approach and appointed a committee to seek a minister to employ on a contract basis. Meanwhile, church life moved forward; replacements were found for the RE and music directors, plus an audio-visual technician was hired to improve and maintain the system of hybrid services that could be attended both virtually and in person.

In April 2023 Rev. Paul R. Beedle arrived in Little Rock to serve on a year's contract as minister. Having received a B.A. from Cornell University in economics and an M.B.A. from Washington University, he changed career directions, earning his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1998. Ordained in 1999, Rev. Paul served congregations in

California and Texas as well as holding several interim minister positions. He came to UUCLR following ten years as the settled minister at the First UU Church of New Orleans. He was welcomed with open arms and went right to work helping the congregation focus on its priorities and re-invigorating Sunday services. It was soon apparent that UUCLR and Rev. Paul were well matched, and on February 18, 2024, the congregation called him to be UUCLR's eighth settled minister. Rev. Paul Beedle was officially installed during a special service October 6, 2024.

Shortly before Rev. Paul's arrival, a strong EF-3 tornado swept through western Little Rock doing only minor damage to the church's buildings but knocking down 50-75 trees in the woodlands

behind and badly damaging the homes and apartments in the neighborhood, leaving many in need of help and support. In addition to the needed repairs and clean-up at UUCLR, members also reached out into the neighborhood to aid those who needed a helping hand.

In 2024 after nine years operating a food pantry at Stephens School, the pantry was moved to larger quarters at McDermott Elementary School just a few blocks from the church on Reservoir Road. The Board established an ad hoc Health and Safety committee to provide guidance on appropriate actions to take in emergency situations that might harm the church or its members. The generous response to a special fund drive enabled the church to purchase a new Steinway piano for the sanctuary to replace the old one that was wearing out after many years of service. As post-pandemic life began to seem more normal, UUCLR was active and growing, heartened to see the RE classrooms filling up again as new families joined.

In its 75<sup>th</sup> year the members of UUCLR reflect on and honor the fortitude and courage of past UUs, who persevered as a community while seeking to right the injustices of their times, and take inspiration to do likewise as they go forward to face today's challenges, guided by the light of UU principles and values.

By Martha W. Rimmer, March 2026

### **Sources:**

Gibson, Gordon D. *Southern Witness, Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2015) 219-228.

Miller, Russell. *The Larger Hope, The Second Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1870- 1970* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985).

Rimmer, Martha Williamson. "The Left Lane on the Road to Salvation: Universalism Comes to Arkansas," *Pulaski County Historical Review* 49:2 (Summer 2001):26-38.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Southern Woman's Place in the Pulpit: Athalia Johnson Irwin Hears the Call of Universalism," *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* vol. XXX (2005):71-104.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Realizing Liberal Religion in Little Rock: The First Twenty-five Years of the Unitarian Universalist Church," unpublished manuscript.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Unitarian Universalists," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>

UUA Directory of Professional Religious Leaders, <https://my.uua.org/directory/people/>

UUCLR Archive of annual reports, business records, clipping scrapbooks, newsletters, member recollections, and other materials.

## APPENDIX I

### Universalist Roots:

In January of 1895, the chief missionary for the Universalists, the Rev. Quillen H. Shinn of Boston began bringing the message of universal salvation to the piney woods of Arkansas and to its capital city of Little Rock. Shinn was an energetic and compelling Universalist preacher, who is credited with starting many Universalist congregations across the nation, even in the southern Bible Belt. It is said that, in a one-to-two-year period, Shinn signed more than 10,000 members and started over 50 churches. He returned to Arkansas once or twice a year until his death in 1907, bringing encouragement to several small congregations in rural communities. His greatest success, however, was with the Little Rock church where he was instrumental in getting funding for a settled minister, the Rev. Frederick Carrier, in 1902.

Carrier was followed by the Rev. Athalia L. J. Irwin in 1904. Irwin, a native Arkansan, was the first ordained woman minister in Arkansas of any denomination and the first southern-born woman minister for the Universalists. Her progressive views along with her writing and speaking abilities made her a notable voice in the conservative climate that prevailed in both Little Rock and Arkansas. Under her leadership, a church building, known as Cottage Chapel, was constructed at Thirteenth and Center streets in Little Rock and the church greatly grew in local prominence. When she left in 1908 to attend seminary, the Rev. George E. Cunningham came to serve as interim minister but stayed for almost four years. His progressive ideas on



Rev. Athalia L. J. Irwin  
Picture from Irwin, *A Bouquet of Verses*,  
Andover-Harvard Theological Library



Universalist Cottage Chapel  
Built in 1905 at 13th and Center Streets, Little Rock  
Picture from *What the Universalist Church is Doing*,  
1907-1909, at Andover-Harvard Theological Library

how to solve the ills of society involved him in the civic affairs of the city and kept his small congregation in the news. The Rev. Henry Clay Ledyard, an even more outspoken and liberal leader, was the last official minister of the Little Rock church. He commanded large crowds who came to hear him espouse his socialist convictions. After Ledyard's departure at the end of 1915, the Universalist congregation lacked strong leadership and by the end of World War I had begun to decline. In 1920 the church building was sold, and the formal Universalist presence in Little Rock came to an end.

### Unitarian Roots:

In February 1930, the Reverend John Clarence Petrie, minister of the First Unitarian Church in Memphis, made a survey of the Little Rock area to see if there was interest in beginning a Unitarian church or reviving the Universalist congregation. He concluded that a self-supporting church was not possible as long as Dr. Hay Watson Smith, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, continued in the pulpit and preached "Liberal Christianity to . . . the 'cream' of Little Rock." The Unitarians, therefore, retreated and waited for more propitious times. Rev. Petrie was successful, however, in making contact with a science professor at Arkansas State Teachers College in Conway, Dr. E.E. Cordrey, who "teaches evolution openly in defiance of the Arkansas law" and who held Unitarian beliefs. As it turned out, Dr. Cordrey would take the lead in the fall of 1950 in establishing the Unitarian Fellowship of Little Rock.

## APPENDIX II

### Fellowship Presidents in the Congregation's Early Years:

E.E. Cordrey	October, 1950 – February, 1951
Robert E. Henderson	February, 1951 – October, 1951
H.A. Schmieding	October, 1951 – May, 1952
Nelson D. Foley	May, 1952 – January, 1953
H.A. Schmieding	January, 1953 – February, 1953
Max Levine	February, 1953 – May, 1953
Joe Bill Hocott	May, 1953 – May, 1955
Samuel Cottrell	1955 – 1957
John Howard	1957 – 1958
Sidney J. Fields	1958 – 1959

### Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Richard Kelley:

Neil E. Bratt	August 1959 – December 1959
Richard V. Ebert	December 1959 – August 1960
William C. Bullard, Jr.	1960 – 1961
John M. Peterson	1961 – 1962
Wilbur H. Oliphant	1962 – 1963
Eugene J. Towbin	1963 – 1964
K. G. Hrishikesan	1964 – 1965
Maxwell J. Lyons II	1965 – 1966
Nils J. Pehrson	1966 – 1967

### Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Fred Campbell:

George Ackerman	1967 – 1968
Sandy Besser	1968 – 1969
George Molnar	1969 – 1970
Arthur Rogers	1970 – 1971
Betty Turner	1971 – 1972
Ben Thomson	1972 – 1973
Carol Gaddy	1973 – 1974
Al Hudnall	1974 – 1975

### Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Gerry Sylvester:

Selma F. Blackburn	1975 – 1976
Ben N. Saltzman	1976 – 1977
Carol Arnold	1977 – 1978
Stewart Scholl	1978 – 1979
Marcel Karklins	1979 – 1980
Shirley Herndon	1980 – 1981
Philip Peters	1981 – 1982
Lynn Hamilton	1982 – 1983

### Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Jean Rickard:

John McNee	1983 – 1984
Helene Rush	1984 – 1985
Jerome D. Blackburn	1985 – 1986

Marc Arnold	1986 – 1987
Barbara Vogel	1987 – 1988
Becky Hamilton	1988 – 1989
Larry Berkeley	1989 – 1990
DeAnn Shields-Marley	1990 – 1991
Patricia Holifield	1991 – 1992

Church Presidents during the interim ministry of Rev. Fern Stanley:

Anne Jacobson	1992 – Resigned October 1992
John Mize	October 1992 – June 1993
Phyllis Bartlow	1993 – 1994

Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Jo Ellen Willis:

R. J. Brown	1994 – 1995
Robert Beason	1995 – 1996
Patrice O'Donoghue	1996 – 1997
Linda VanBlaricom	1997 – 1998
Kaye Lundgren	1998 – 1999
David Rickard	1999 – 2000
Johnye Strickland	2000 – 2001
Virginia Williams	2001 – 2002

Church Presidents during the interim ministry of Rev. Scotty Meek:

Andy Kessel	2002 – 2003
Judy Jacuzzi	2003 – 2004

Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Robert Klein:

Randy Hanson	2004 – 2005
Dawn Harris	2005 – 2006
Roger Howe	2006 – 2007
William Goolsby	2007 – 2008
Sarah Prickett	2008 – 2009
Bill Briscoe	2009 – 2010
Joe Meehan	2010 – 2011
Edith Bradberry	2011 – 2012
John Adams	2012 – 2013

Church Presidents during the interim ministry of Rev. Jennie Barrington:

Nancy Kimpel	2013 – 2014
Katherine (Kater) Reynolds	2014 – 2015

Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Jan Nielsen:

John McNee	2015 – 2016
Cas Rifkin	2016 – 2017
Mindy Morrell	2017 – 2018
Dan Danielson	2018 – 2020
Sue McDonald	2020 – 2021
Marci Riggs	2021 – 2022
David McCullough	2022 – 2023

Church Presidents during the ministry of Rev. Paul Beedle:

Laurie Smith Prud'homme 2023 - 2024

Debbie Goolsby 2024 - 2025

Laurie Smith Prud'homme 2025 - 2026