

Miracle on 49th Avenue – December 21, 2014

by **David Green**

We hold our Path to Membership gatherings a few times a year. If you've become a member in the past few years you've been to one of those. They're for anyone interested in learning more about joining our Fellowship. We discuss the Seven Unitarian Universalist Principles, we talk about our mission, how we're structured as a congregation, and very briefly we review some history of the Fellowship.

It's at that point in the conversation I'll take out our membership book, signed by anyone who's ever joined the Fellowship since it was founded in 1949 and officially chartered as a Unitarian congregation in 1950.

I'd assumed until a few weeks ago that no Unitarian or Universalist churches existed in Amarillo prior to that time.

But like many of you, at home I have a copy of Paul Carlson's book, *Amarillo: The Story of a Western Town*, published in 2006. It's one of those history books that sells well in the city it's written about, but not so much anywhere else. I was flipping through it to see if the book happened to mention anything about this Fellowship. It doesn't. But on page 136, in a chapter describing the years of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression among other things, the author writes that Amarillo was home to 25 churches of various denominations in 1933. In a religious laundry list – squeezed between Seventh Day Adventist and Episcopalian – is the word, "Unitarian."

Can you imagine being a Unitarian in Amarillo, Texas in 1933? That must've been lonely. I wondered about who those hardy souls might have been, but I hit a dead end. Maybe they drifted away during the Dust Bowl. Maybe they disbanded. I don't know what happened to them. If you know, I'd love to find out.

I'm not even sure the people who first founded this congregation in 1950 were aware of those 1933 Unitarians.

It's important for us to know about our history. And I always feel a little guilty in the Path to Membership meetings that we don't spend more time going over it. Because, there was a reason why a small group of people banded together and organized themselves and applied to be formally chartered as a Unitarian church in Amarillo.

In particular, we need to know why that small group later made a rather big decision: to acquire some land and build this structure.

Many of us don't put much stock in things of a supernatural nature, but what they did together – I think – is something of a miracle.

To tell this story I dug into our files and reacquainted myself with histories written by members, and many other documents. The first history, by Wayne Darrow, covers the years between 1950 and 1973. The second was an update written anonymously in 1986. We're still waiting for someone to volunteer to fill in the gap between '86 and today.

Wayne Darrow really doesn't go into much detail about how and why a group of fledgling Unitarians came together, other than mentioning a man named Jerry Malin. Jerry was a sports editor at the newspaper in the late 1940s. He apparently was unhappy with traditional religion in this area, so he distributed Unitarian tracts to his friends and neighbors and held "bull sessions" with anyone who was interested.

The popular image many of us have about the late 40s and early 50s was of an America of great cultural conformity. In some respects it was. But for many people, traditional religion failed to resonate, or to speak to huge ethical and philosophical questions raised by the Holocaust, nuclear weapons, the growing paranoia of communism and the threat to civil liberties, and civil rights for African Americans.

And like much of the country, folks were on the move. Amarillo experienced an influx of people from other places, who worked at Pantex or the Air Force base. People from the east coast and west coast, where liberal religion was more common, including Unitarians.

There were ten charter members, who met one night a month in member's homes. They eventually moved their meetings to a conference room at the Globe-News offices. I'm sure the folks at the paper would be thrilled to hear that. But the Unitarians didn't just get together to talk; they did some unusual stuff, by Amarillo standards.

In 1952 they raised money to bring a group of African American gospel singers to perform at the City Auditorium, and gave food and clothing to support a black children's home on the north side of town.

At their meetings they discussed controversial topics: race relations and civil rights, capital punishment, and euthanasia. In two years they started meeting every week at the YMCA. Occasionally, a Unitarian minister from Wichita, Kansas or Fort Worth or even Boston would come through to conduct services. Or a professor from West Texas State would speak, but most of the time everything was led by the members themselves.

By 1955, the Fellowship had attracted and grown a handful of key leaders. Wayne Darrow describes them as "bold, free spirits" who were very organized and also very generous.

Don Curphey, Flora Chandler, and Capres Hatchett were instrumental. Flora Chandler – and we are sitting in Chandler Hall, you'll notice – was dubbed "mother superior." She infused the group with Unitarian ideas and practices, and insisted the congregation set aside money as a nest egg.

Capres Hatchett was a doctor, who went on to be head of the radiology department at Northwest Texas Hospital for 39 years. For 46 years he led the Great Books Discussion Group. He was a huge patron of the arts, loved classical music, and personally selected all the recorded music played during services.

The congregation moved from the YMCA to the YWCA in 1961, and the group began talking about making a home of their own, and maybe even hiring a minister. By 1965, the money they'd been setting aside had grown to \$9,000, and the congregation had reached almost 60 members.

A building committee was formed. A couple of the original pieces of property chosen as prime spots for a new building were withdrawn from the market when the landowners realized it might mean a group of religious liberals would be moving into their neighborhood.

Apparently, the Fellowship had already gained something of a reputation. The ultra-conservative John Birch Society was active in Amarillo in the 50s and early 60s, and they would occasionally send an observer to Sunday services to find out if the Fellowship was actually a secret nest of communists.

Ultimately, in 1966, a two-acre plot of land at the corner of Cornell Street and 49th Avenue was bought for \$10,000. I looked at the original deed, and though it was a little ironic the seller of the property was the Amarillo Baptist Association. I wonder if when they realized what they'd done, they had to repent.

For a couple years the property was just an investment, but in 1968, Jerre Sprouse and Tommy Hicks formed a building committee. They chose an architect, and when the initial plans had been drawn up, a congregational meeting was held with Harlow Sprouse presenting the case for going forward. Harlow was a lawyer, who died just last year. So he knew how to convince a jury.

In that meeting in May of 1968, Harlow said: " ...this year an energetic and fearless group decided to do something about a building...a place of our own, not in the future, but now! (Why) do we need a place of our own? ...we have outgrown our facilities..."

"This hasn't been as apparent to the adults who don't participate in our religious education program as it has been to the children and teachers involved in that program...and these quarters (this meeting space) will not be adequate for our needs very much longer...our attendance has just about doubled over the past three or four years and keeps increasing."

And then Harlow said this: "I submit to you...we need to grow to become a force in this community. We need more voices for liberal religion. Is there some inherent law in our society that requires that only the foolish should be heard? Must we forever stand by while the only sound heard in the area of religion is a primitive chant done in medieval terminology? Are we afraid of contaminating our community with adult religion?"

He goes on: "Oh, I know there are those who insist that a pile of stone and wood and glass, logically should have no effect on our growth, but the history of other fellowships and churches shows that it does have such an effect. Just because a visitor is interested in our freedom to pursue religious truth does not mean he isn't also looking for a church that presents an image of responsibility and stability and permanence."

"The truth is that we need a place. A place with which to identify. A place where people can find us. We need a place of our own to go on Sunday mornings. And not just on Sunday mornings...we need a place for discussion groups. For...meetings. For social affairs. A place where our children can be married, and where memorial services can be held for our dead."

"We need to be able to furnish a place for other groups in which we might be interested. For art groups, for community film series, for great books, for youth groups, for civil rights meetings. A place that can be a haven for our souls, and an arena for our ideas."

I don't know how you could turn down an argument like that. The project was approved, and as Wayne Darrow writes, through hard work and perseverance, imagination and plain gall, two lawyers, Harlow Sprouse and James Dorres – who had joined the Fellowship in January 1967 – collaborated in leading the effort.

Eventually Harlow and James put together an impressive presentation to lenders, and also gathered pledges from 17 members to loan to the fellowship \$51,000 dollars as security for a mortgage. The Tulia Savings and Loan Association loaned \$35,000. There was \$5,500 dollars left in the building fund. The women's group gave \$1,000.

Then it was learned that the Veach Committee of the North Shore Unitarian Society in New York had money available for loans to Unitarian groups. From that society, \$12,000 was loaned for 15 years.

In the fall of 1968 the financing was complete. The total, including furnishings, a parking lot, and the cost of paving 49th Avenue, came to \$66,000.

It was completed in 1969 and dedicated in a special ceremony on September 21. In the ceremony an "Act of Dedication" was read in unison by the congregation.

It declared: "The purpose of our religion is not to stamp our minds upon others. It is not to make other see with our eyes, but to encourage all to look inquiringly and steadily with their own. It is our purpose to awaken our consciences and enlarge our vision, so that each man, (woman), and child may find for (them)self what is right and good. It is in this spirit and with that purpose that we do now dedicate this building."

Adjusted for inflation, today the cost of what this congregation built in 1968 – not counting the land – would be almost half a million dollars: \$454,000. There were less than 60 members. The average attendance on Sunday was between 30 and 40. The final loan payment was made in 1987.

My hope today is that each of us can hear the story of how this place came into being, and understand the significance of the gift we've inherited. It's not just a building. It represents something much larger. This place is important because it stands for something.

It embodies the hopes and dreams of people we should never forget, because we share their same hopes and dreams, of a liberal faith community thriving and growing and building into the future.

It's no miracle. It's the people whose names are inscribed in this book. It's you and me.