

CHAPTER 7

The Bowman-Bellingham Years

by Richard K. Bellingham & Herbert K. Beals

Upon the announcement of Mr. Bachelder's impending departure, the process of finding a new minister was initiated. It was something unfamiliar to a congregation that had known the same minister for a quarter of a century. On April 4, 1971, the President's Council elected a pulpit committee to undertake the search.

Chaired by Warren Marple, the committee held its first meeting on April 19. The idea of having an "interim minister" was discussed but quickly rejected. After a series of meetings and a survey of the congregation's attitudes and beliefs, the committee was ready to recommend a candidate by the end of June. On August 15, after a week-long candidating procedure, the congregation voted almost unanimously to approve the committee's recommendation. Atkinson's new minister would be the Reverend Robert Maurice Bowman, a Unitarian Universalist minister. He and his wife, Mary (nee Gulley), arrived in Oregon City on September 16, 1971; three days later he delivered his first sermon as Atkinson's settled minister.

.He was born on April 7, 1927, in Chicago, Illinois. He completed his undergraduate education at Florida Southern College (Lakeland, Florida), where he earned his AB degree (1949) summa cum laude. His theological training was completed at the University of Chicago, in cooperation with Meadville Theological School and the Federated Theological Faculty, where he received his BD degree (1951). For five years, from 1950 to 1955, he served as a chaplain in the US Naval Reserve.

Mr. Bowman's first position as a settled minister was at the Universalist Church of Waterloo, Iowa (1953-1955). He was the settled minister for four other successive churches before coming to Atkinson Memorial. Two of them—a Congregational Universalist church in Avon, Illinois, and a Congregationalist Unitarian church in Colorado Springs, Colorado—had dual affiliations, which would seem to have been good preparation for the situation at Atkinson Memorial Church.

When the Bowmans came to Oregon City in mid-September 1971, Atkinson Memorial was in difficult circumstances. The controversies of recent years had taken their toll in a declining membership. As of January 1, 1956, several months before the controversy over Mr. Bachelder's theology erupted, the church's active membership was put at 761. But by April 30, 1971, on the eve of the Bowmans' arrival, active membership had plunged to 266.* Such a decline in membership was having serious financial consequences, not to mention the blow it dealt the congregation's morale. Efforts to bring a halt to this decline were urgently needed, and Mr. Bowman, it was hoped, was the person to do it.

In January 1972, various initiatives were launched to reverse the decline in membership. One program, called Circle Suppers, was designed to get potential or new members together with present members, seated around a dinner table—ideally a circular one, and hence the name—to get better acquainted with one another. The suppers were held on Saturday evenings, hosted usually by members in their respective homes. A Media Discussion Group was formed to review currently significant books, films, and television productions. It met once a month on Wednesday evenings. In an effort to reach out to the larger community, Mr. Bowman encouraged strengthening the

* Based on *Annual Reports* for 1955, p. 6, and for 1971-72, p. 4.

church's connections with Clackamas Community College. This eventually led to the joint sponsorship by Atkinson Memorial Church and the Community College of a "Great Discussions Program," which ran for eight sessions between February 16 and April 6, 1973. These efforts primarily concerned adults; but as Mr. Bowman observed, "Religious Education is the one major facet of our church . . . which has not 'gotten off the ground'; indeed, it hardly exists."*

The need to restore a religious education program for children and young people would come to assume a major role in the efforts to stem the decline in church membership.

On October 1, 1972, Roy A. Ockert and his wife Virginia became members of Atkinson Memorial Church. The significance of their decision to join the church would soon be apparent. Mr. Ockert was a Unitarian Universalist minister, who was then employed as a Union official. He had previously occupied the pulpit of the Unitarian Church of Fullerton, California. His wife Virginia also had considerable experience with religious education. On May 30, 1973, the Ockerts plunged into church affairs with all the energy they could muster: he in service on the Membership Committee and a newly formed Program and Publicity Committee; she on the Religious Education Committee, with designation as the Director of Religious Education. Both were also quite capable of filling the pulpit in the event of Mr. Bowman's absence. Another couple, Donald and Darlene Helwig, who had joined the church a month before the Ockerts, also brought to Atkinson significant new talents and energy. They helped rejuvenate the church's musical program—the choir in particular. Mr. Helwig's artistic abilities were put to good use enlivening the cover pages of the weekly bulletin (order of service); he edited the church's monthly newsletter, *News and Views*, and assisted in

* *News & Views*, Jan. 19, 1972, vol. 22, no. 1, p. 1.

production of various church publications. On Sunday, May 19, 1974, he would also join with church historian Georgia Farmer to co-chair the celebration of the 130th anniversary of the church's founding.

All of these activities, especially revival of the religious education program, boosted the congregation's morale; but the best that could be said of membership was that it was no longer dropping so precipitously. Of the several newly joined members at this time, one would prove to be an unusually welcome addition to the Atkinson fold. His name was C. Jack Ryan, and as with Mr. Ockert, he was an ordained minister. But Mr. Ryan's background was in other respects distinctly different.

In the summer of 1973, Messrs. Bowman and Ockert, convinced the Church Council that a large-scale mailing of an informational brochure about Atkinson Memorial Church might help to attract some prospective new members. There were expressions of skepticism, but the mailing was approved and proceeded. In seeming vindication of the skeptics, the return was low, much as they had expected.* But one response alone—that of Mr. Ryan's—would prove the effort worthwhile.

He was born December 28, 1932, in Basseterre, St. Kitts, British West Indies. After his childhood in St. Kitts, he attended the West Indies School of Theology in Trinidad from 1958 to 1960. Mr. Ryan had moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, in hopes that he could emigrate from there to the United States and eventually establish permanent residency in Oregon. He moved to Portland in 1969. At the time he responded to the Atkinson Memorial Church mailing, he had completed three years of study at Warner Pacific College, and he had secured a position at Portland's Roosevelt High School teaching social studies. In order to gain an immigrant visa to remain in the

* According to the late Lorna Marple, only a single response was received—that of Mr. Ryan's.

United States, Mr. Ryan needed a sponsor. Acting on the recommendations of the church moderator, Warren Marple, and the minister, Mr. Bowman, the Board of Trustees agreed to the sponsorship. It was a decision they would never have occasion to regret.

Over the next 15 years Mr. Ryan would become the church's unofficial associate minister filling the pulpit in the minister's absence, performing weddings, memorial services, and other pastoral duties. With his contributions together with those of others such as the Ockerts and Helwigs, the prospects for improvement in the church's circumstances seemed to brighten. There was, however, no major upsurge in membership during the early 1970s, with membership stabilizing between 240 and 250.* It was a time of economic recession in general and gasoline shortages in particular. Given these conditions, it was no surprise that the church's financial circumstances also remained a source of concern.

But just as the downward spiral seemed to be abating, news of Mr. Bowman's sudden and untimely death shocked the congregation as nothing before in its long history. He died of a heart attack in his automobile just as he was arriving at his West Linn home after a meeting at the church. It happened on the evening of March 13, 1975. He had served the church just three and one-half years. A memorial service was conducted five days later by the Reverend Alan G. Deale, then minister of the First Unitarian Church of Portland, assisted by the Reverend C. Jack Ryan and the Reverend Roy C. Ockert. It was a much-saddened congregation during the Palm Sunday and Easter services that followed on the heels of Mr. Bowman's passing.

* *Annual Reports* for 1972, 1973, 1974, recorded memberships of 243, 247, 249, respectively.

Under the leadership of church moderator, Ruth Beall, a pulpit committee was formed, using procedures similar to those four years before. Its deliberations began on April 20, 1975, at which time Herbert Beals was elected chair and William Gregory appointed secretary. The committee met through the summer and, after undertaking a survey of the congregation's attitudes and beliefs, reached agreement early in September on a candidate. He was the Reverend Richard K. Bellingham, then minister of the First Congregational Church of Millinocket, Maine. At the conclusion of a week-long candidating process, following the service on September 21, the congregation voted unanimously to call Mr. Bellingham. He would enter upon his pastoral duties at Atkinson on November 16, 1975.



Rev. Richard K. Bellingham in the minister's office

Mr. Bellingham was born in Bisbee, Arizona, on March 4, 1930, following which he moved with his family to Riverton Heights, Washington; Glasgow, Montana; and finally St. Helens, Oregon. He had grown up in the Pacific Northwest and had earlier associations with Atkinson Memorial through his father, the Reverend Ernest R. Bellingham, minister of the Congregational Church in St. Helens, Oregon. The younger Mr. Bellingham graduated from Reed College in 1952, where he earned his B. A. degree with interdivisional majors in chemistry, sociology, and education. Following this, he trained for the ministry at The Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, where he received his M. Div. degree in 1955, while "in care" of the North Willamette Association. Prior to his pastorate at Millinocket, Maine, Mr. Bellingham had served as a Congregational minister in McCall, Idaho, Tacoma, Washington, and Royal Oak, Michigan.

His father had been co-founder with Horace Bachelder of the North Willamette Association. In addition, his mother, Grace Esther Bellingham (nee Kitchell), had been the association delegate to the 1954 General Council meeting at Yale University discussed earlier in this work (pp. 66-67).

As also noted previously, the North Willamette Association had expired in the late 1950s and there were no continuing Congregational churches in Oregon with which to have fellowship. With the formal organizing of the United Church of Christ in the early 1960s, Congregational churches in Tacoma and Maltby, Washington, and in Idaho and Montana opted out. And new independent churches that had been formed in Seattle, Spokane and Alaska did likewise. These churches banded together to continue a tradition of independence by forming the Pacific Northwest Association of

Congregational Churches in 1968. Although Atkinson Memorial was not represented at these earlier meetings, a delegation was sent to the 1976 meeting and in 1977 Atkinson Memorial was formally received into membership in the Pacific Northwest Association.* Atkinson hosted meetings of the regional association in 1981, 1986 and 1993, and church members have held various offices in the regional association. Thus since 1977 regional fellowship with Congregationalists, which had been lacking since the 1950s was regained in addition to the unbroken affiliation at the national level since 1955. Regional and continental Unitarian Universalist affiliation has been continuous since 1961.

In the spring of 1975, at the end of hostilities in Vietnam, a flood of refugees poured into the United States as well as other host nations. Two church members, Elizabeth Bentley (nee Marple) and Betty Stone, co-chairs of the Social Concerns Committee, were instrumental in initiating, organizing, and coordinating Atkinson assistance for such refugees. The first refugee family to be helped was that of Boa Tran, including his wife, Mai Lien, and their five children. In subsequent months, the Social Concerns Committee became so involved in such assistance that it was sometimes referred to as the Refugee Committee. Not all families assisted were from Vietnam. A Cambodian woman, Kanha King, with her several children and other relatives, were in considerable distress having narrowly escaped the infamous “killing fields” of the Khmer Rouge terror. Her husband, an official in the Battambang provincial government, had remained in Cambodia where his fate for a time was uncertain—although it was later learned that he had survived. Other Atkinson members who contributed significantly to this program included Pat Parker and Patty (nee Beals)

* Membership in the regional or national association was not automatically membership in both.

Laughlin. By the early 1980s, the Indochinese refugee crises had largely subsided, and the involvement of Atkinson's Social Concerns Committee was eventually phased out.

A pruning of the Atkinson's membership roll in the mid-1980s brought active members down to approximately 140. With but one membership roll and two associational affiliations a policy was adopted to report 50 percent of the total membership number to each association. Membership hovered close to 140 for two decades—losses of older members offsetting new accessions. But over the entire period there was real growth of active membership in attendance and participation, an increase in the proportion of younger members, and a substantially increased operating budget. Financial stability was improved by the development of an endowment program urged by long-time treasurer, Norma Benedict. Some individuals had already donated investments before 1975, but these were expanded upon by donations from the congregation at large. High interest rates during the 1980s helped meet costs at a time of substantial building improvements in that decade.

Numerous physical improvements were made to the building since 1975. Protective Plexiglas outer windows were fitted over all but the very smallest stained glass windows (1976-1977), financed out of memorial funds. Attractive gold curtains screened off the balconies, which were no longer in use and had sustained water damage.* Both of these projects had the further advantage of reducing heat loss from the sanctuary.

During the 1980s, access to the building was improved by the addition of railings to the two major entrances on Sixth Street and John Adams. Stair lifts were provided for the interior steps at the John Adams entrance so that disabled persons might find access

* The balconies were later repaired, in hopes they would be needed as the congregation grew.

by way of the ramp entrance through the downstairs. Both of these improvements also were made possible by memorial gifts.

The early- to mid-1980s marked the most daring project to be undertaken by volunteers—the complete rebuilding of the roof. As previously noted the roof had been troubled with leaks almost from the day the church had been completed, and all “patch up” solutions had proven temporary. It was impossible to prevent the return of ugly water stains on the sanctuary ceiling soon after every repainting. One trustee, Lambert Benedict, had the courage to gather other members of the congregation as a work force to replace and realign the roof to shed rainwater more effectively. The average age of that crew was about 70 years; the hours were long and strenuous; and the work dragged on for months. At one point, Lambert Benedict fell from the tower base over the John Adams entrance—a height of about 35 feet. But miraculously he landed on shrubbery, and after brief observation at the local hospital he was released with no apparent serious injuries. A co-worker, Rendel Aldredge, saw the roof project through to completion.

The rebuilding of the church roof was one of the most stressful periods in the church’s history. Energies were necessarily concentrated on the building, and little of the congregation’s modest resources were available for creative programming. Until interior refurbishing became a realistic possibility, the building’s appearance continued to deteriorate. It was also a period with very few new accessions to the church’s membership. Though no split threatened as in previous decades, it was nevertheless a time of profound discouragement and genuine doubt about the congregation’s future.

But the roof project was completed with the result that for the first time since the church was built there was no significant leak for over a decade. With renewed pride in the building’s appearance, the membership was able to go ahead with a total

refurbishing of its interior and exterior, as well as the placement of an attractive new sign board at the corner of Sixth and John Adams. The church building is a delight to all passersby and very popular for weddings. In 1984, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, for reasons of its distinctive architectural merit and its historic association with George Henry Atkinson. The church's historian, Herbert Beals, was instrumental in writing the proposal and securing the designation.

When the Reverend Horace Bachelder died on November 15, 1981, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, he had been the last surviving former minister of Atkinson Memorial Church. He had been minister since 1971 of the First Parish Church of Plymouth (the church of the Mayflower Pilgrims). In his memory, one half of the downstairs fellowship hall (adjoining the Martha Ream Dining Room) was designated the Reverend Horace L. Bachelder Room. His widow, Evangeline, and other members of the family joined the dedication program.

On November 4, 1989, the congregation was stunned by the sudden and untimely death of the Reverend C. Jack Ryan. His wife Patricia (Trish) had found him in his study, apparently the victim of a stroke or heart attack. He had previously been jogging as was his custom upon arising in the morning.

Since his affiliation with Atkinson Memorial, nearly 16 years earlier, Mr. Ryan had served the congregation by providing creative programs as well as pulpit and pastoral services during the minister's vacation. His thoughtful sermons were always eagerly anticipated, and he was greatly beloved by Atkinson members and friends alike. Since joining the church, he had earned a master's degree from the University of Portland (1976) and a doctorate in urban studies from Portland State University (1983). He also became a naturalized citizen of the United States. At the time of his death, he

was a social studies teacher at Franklin High School in southeast Portland. Though not a paid member of the church staff, he was essentially the church's associate minister. When he held the position of church moderator, he initiated the Moderator's Award (later called the Atkinson Award) to be given on occasion to certain church members for distinguished service.

Another of Mr. Ryan's dreams was a cultural center to sponsor concerts, lectures and other intercultural offerings to be held at Atkinson. Upon his death, the Jack Ryan Foundation, funded by a substantial gift from his widow, Patricia, (and augmented by other donations) was established to support such a program. On the Sunday nearest the second anniversary of his death, the nationally acclaimed choir from Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School in northeast Portland sang before a full audience in the Atkinson Church sanctuary, as the first in this ongoing series of programs.

Church bylaws received a major overhaul during the 1980s. Committees and the number of members they each called for were too numerous for the membership to fill. The various committees and the Board of Trustees were consolidated as program departments of a single elected Church Council. This was a change from the Congregational model of boards of trustees for finances and property, and deacons for the spiritual concerns of the church—a separation of powers, as it were—as opposed to the Unitarian model of a single board of directors or trustees. The trustees are descendants of the old Society, which held the property, while the Church represented the worshipers as in early New England Congregationalism. Because Atkinson had long since given up its Board of Deacons, the Church Council as then constituted seemed the way to give full attention to the total program—not just property and finances—of the church.

As the early 1980s were a time of discouragement, the later 1980s proved much more upbeat. Greater numbers of newer people, especially younger ones with families were attending. Though still a predominantly dispersed congregation there was a gain in numbers from within Oregon City. After several ups and downs, a relatively permanent religious education program emerged with a staffing for classes from preschool through junior high. After a hiatus of several years the Adult Forum, a discussion group, resumed in September 1979 and has continued since then without a break. A monthly women's book discussion group was initiated, as was also Philethia, a women's support group. Adult education was becoming more frequent and extended.

Ladies Aid had for many years been attended by men as well as women, and it was eventually re-designated as the Ladies Aid and Men's Club. All reference to gender would later be removed and the group renamed Atkinson Auxiliary. At the urgings of Charles and Mildred Creamer, Thanksgiving Day dinners became annual events at Atkinson, providing a sort of home away from home on that day for many church members.

Since the late 1970s, Atkinson became increasingly involved in local ecumenical endeavors. In 1977 Atkinson was one of three churches—the others were the Baptists and the Methodists—to reactivate Thanksgiving Eve community services, in which seven churches came to participate, including St. Johns Catholic. Mr. Bellingham served as a member of the volunteer chaplain's corps at Willamette Falls Hospital, begun in the early 1980s. In the later 1980s, Atkinson joined with other Oregon City churches in organizing and supporting, with food, money and service, a program for the city's hungry called Helping Other People Eat (HOPE).

In December 1991, Atkinson joined with the Eastrose (Gresham), South Park (West Linn), and Boones Ferry (Tualatin) UUA congregations in a combined Christmas Eve service. Afterwards an overflow attendance met in the Atkinson sanctuary. Since its inception, the popularity of this Christmas Eve service has not waned and continues to be observed—although no longer primarily a joint observance, following the Boones Ferry merger.

Beginning in the autumn of 1993 and continuing into the spring of 1994, Atkinson celebrated its sesquicentennial year or 150th birthday, with a series of special programs. They were arranged for and coordinated by a sesquicentennial committee with June Routson and Herbert Beals as co-chairs. It culminated in the anniversary weekend of May 21 and 22.

The festivities were opened by a banquet on October 30, 1993, with keynote speaker Thomas Vaughan, Oregon's historian laureate and former executive director of the Oregon Historical Society. Next, a musical program featuring soloist Kurt-Alexander Zeller was offered on November 7, 1993. A program called "Hearts and Hands: A Social History of 19th Century Women and Quilts" was presented by folklorist Joanne Mulcahy on November 13. A lecture by UUA historian Dr. Arnold Crompton scheduled for December 5, had to be cancelled because of the speaker's illness. Another musical program came next on February 27, 1994, consisting of Nancy Hascall, hand bell ringer, assisted by Pam Davidson.

On March 20, Atkinson women presented a special program during the regular service, which continued into the afternoon. Author and historian, Terrence O'Donnell, delivered on April 17 a lecture entitled "The Indian Wars of Oregon: A Tragedy in Five Acts." The series ended with a musical program presented by the River City Consort on

May 1. The Atkinson sesquicentennial observance concluded with a special celebration during the regular morning service on May 22, 1994.

At the congregation's annual meeting on the afternoon of May 22, Mr. Bellingham announced his intention to retire at the end of February, 1995. On Sunday, March 5, he was fêted by the congregation and honored for nearly 20 years of service as pastor with the designation of Minister Emeritus.