

CHAPTER 8

The Boones Ferry Story

A History of Boones Ferry Unitarian Congregation, Tualatin, Oregon

by Dorothy Bartlett

The Boones Ferry Congregation came into being through the Extension Ministry Program of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which provided partial funding for ministerial salaries in developing areas when favorable factors for starting a new church could be demonstrated. The necessary factors, other than population growth, were: 1) a percentage of educated persons adequate to seed a new liberal congregation; 2) assurance that enough local funding be available to get the program off to a strong start; and 3) the goodwill of nearby Unitarian Universalist churches.

The first of these was satisfied with a study that applied UU saturation rates throughout the Pacific Northwest District to various population centers south of Portland. The Lake Oswego-West Linn-Tualatin sector provided a promising location for a future church. The second and third factors were met with a bequest of \$50,000 from the estate of Dr. Leola Lorenzen, which was administered by the First Unitarian Church of Portland.

The Reverend Deborah Roth and Dorothy Bartlett attended training classes given by the UUA Extension Department in Boston, Massachusetts. Ms Bartlett became the New Congregation Planner, preparing the required New Congregation Proposal for the UUA. Ms Roth was a 1973 University of Illinois graduate. She had earned a Masters in Divinity from Andover Newton Theological School in 1990 and was a ministerial intern at the First Unitarian Church in Portland in 1988-89. She became the New

Congregation Organizer, finding and working with persons interested in forming a liberal congregation, and locating meeting and office space. In late 1990 and early 1991, informational meetings were announced in local newspapers, and a core group formed rather quickly.

Sunday services began early in September 1991 with the Reverend Debora Roth serving as half-time minister for a year before funding allowed for full-time ministry. Soon an office was rented in Tualatin and a newsletter called *The TrailBlazer* began publication. Forty-three persons signed the membership book on Charter Sunday, May 3, 1992. Many pioneering members, including Laura Struble, Jim Grant, Mary Bosch, Megan Esler, Ron Milton and Dan Hayes took on leadership tasks and remained active throughout the Boones Ferry era.

The name Boones Ferry UU Congregation had a special meaning. Historic Boones Ferry Road runs southwest from Portland through Lake Oswego and Tualatin to Wilsonville and beyond, tracing a path through much of the territory included in the parameters of the congregation. The word congregation was chosen to represent inclusiveness and the slogan “Everybody Welcome” was established.

The first years, starting with a very low percentage of seasoned Unitarians, were peppered with the excitement of a new venture. New members learned the “how-to’s” of church work by actually doing it. Religious Education, a very high priority, was diligently carried out by parents and others, with Kim Milton, Diana Antoniskis, Linda DeMent, Erin Lommen-Hayes, Mark Rarick, Elka Turner, and Helen Sherman-Wentz active from the start.

After two years of Sunday services in a rather uninspiring elementary school auditorium, Boones Ferry was happy to move Sunday operations to the small auditorium

at Tualatin High School. The space had a friendly ambiance for worship services, but the setup crew still wrestled with banners, hymnals, candles and name tags. Religious education classes were badly overcrowded. The hospitality committee made coffee on a table just inside the school's front door. By 1995 a new space committee was looking in earnest for a building to buy, with Marilyn Lunner taking the lead. Music was promoted and a small choir sang frequently. When Jim Dana joined the congregation, the music program was enhanced significantly with his synthesizer, enthusiasm, and musical talent. Jim would later become the choir director and pianist at Atkinson.

During the startup years a distinguishing feature of the church was the close fellowship experienced by all who participated. Potluck dinners (with much chocolate in evidence) were popular. Mike Sweek, Richard Turner and Jerry Jones earned reputations as fine chefs. Charlotte Abernathy coordinated annual Christmas Eve services with Eastrose UU Fellowship and Atkinson. Other favorite events included Easter egg hunts, Flower Communion, Thanksgiving Bread Communion, and summer camping. The intimate quality that prevailed in the lay-led programming produced a strong sense of empathy among members. Personal and family problems were shared openly. The serious illness and death of charter member Dennis McKinney was felt deeply by all. Marion Minar started the women's group called Sisters, which met once a month in members' homes, where a wide range of interests inspired programs ranging from growing lettuce in a wheelbarrow to thoughts about witchcraft.

After three years, Ms Roth married and moved to Seattle. She was followed at Boones Ferry in the fall of 1994 by the Reverend Alexander Holt, who arrived from Starr King Seminary and stayed one year, then, in 1995-96, Boones Ferry undertook a lay-led year with committed leadership from Heidi Heydlauff, Warren Wylie, Kate

Grant, Diane Brooke, and Phil Wentz among others. Visiting ministers and credo services were popular Sunday morning fare, but enthusiasm was noticeably beginning to drain away.

In the following year the Reverend Tim Haley became a consulting minister. After three months, however, he was convinced that with decreasing volunteer energy and the serious decline in both membership and Sunday visitors, Boones Ferry could not attain its stated goals—to have a building, a minister, and hearty religious education—in spite of the strong sense of community that prevailed in the fledgling church.

At a congregational meeting on May 19, 1997, following lengthy deliberation led by President Ron Milton, the members voted to discontinue as a congregation. The Board of Trustees then offered various options for a change of operating mode. The consensus was that merging with another Unitarian Universalist church was the most desirable choice. Atkinson Memorial was the most appropriate sister church to approach with the idea. Atkinson was the closest for many members, it had an attractive historic building, and in April, the Reverend Tim Haley had been called to serve as the settled minister.

The legal aspects of the merger went smoothly under the management of several persons, including Ron Milton, Marilyn Lunner, Charlotte Sinclair and Carol Dey Hibbs of Boones Ferry; and Martyn Frye, Dan Layton, Margi McCue, and Jacqueline Griffith from Atkinson. Boones Ferry brought a gift to Atkinson of 100 new hymnals, 30 adult members and as many children, plus funds which helped carpet the sanctuary. Atkinson was now poised on the crest of a wave of transition. On Sunday, September 7, 1997, the newly blended Atkinson congregation worshipped together for the first time.