

CHAPTER 9

A Time of Transition

by Herbert K. Beals

With the impending retirement of Mr. Bellingham in February 1995, Atkinson Memorial Church entered what would prove to be an extended transitional period. Unlike earlier efforts to fill vacated pastorates as quickly as possible, the idea of allowing for a transition period was now favored. Instead of establishing a pulpit search committee immediately, the Church Council appointed a transition committee to explore possible options as to how the church might best proceed to seek a settled minister in the wake of Mr. Bellingham's retirement.

The transition committee, chaired by Martyn Frye, was first convened on March 8, 1994. It would consider three basic options: 1) proceed directly to search for a settled minister; 2) seek an interim minister to occupy the pulpit while the search for a settled minister was in process; and 3) a UUA program called an Extension Ministry.* By the end of summer, the committee recommended that the Church Council proceed with the second option and seek an interim minister. The Council agreed and the transition committee commenced the search for a suitable interim minister.

In June 1995, the committee reached agreement on an interim candidate. She was the Reverend Ashley Margaret Cook, a Congregational minister, who was then pastor of the First Congregational Church of Etna (a suburb of Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania.

* This program involved a three year period during which the pulpit would be filled by an extension minister who—unlike an interim minister—could be a candidate for settled minister. It also included some degree of financial assistance especially for newly organized congregations.

Ms. Cook received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1987 from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, where she majored in philosophy with a minor in English. She received ministerial training at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, from which she graduated with a master of divinity degree in 1991. In addition to her experience as pastor of the Etna Church (1991-95), Ms. Cook had also held the position of minister of education at the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, New York (1989-91); and she had served as student minister at the Congregational Church of Bound Brook, New Jersey (1988-89). She was offered the interim position at Atkinson for a period of one year* or until a settled minister was in place.

Ms. Cook preached her first sermon as interim minister at Atkinson on September 10, 1995. Although many women had previously spoken from the pulpit in various capacities, Ms Cook was the first to do so as the congregation's minister. It was a significant turn in Atkinson Church history. She brought with her an infectious optimism, and although she did not espouse a Unitarian Universalist theology, she advocated a liberal Christianity in which differing religious traditions are respected. During her tenure as interim minister, Ms Cook initiated or continued efforts to overhaul the church's bylaws and improve the approach to the annual pledge drive.

In October 1996, a notable change occurred when Norma Benedict tendered her resignation as church treasurer, a position she had held for 25 years. Other changes proceeded apace. The secretary's office had long been located on the opposite side of the sanctuary from the minister's study. The room adjoining the minister's study served for many years as the Board of Trustee's meeting room as well as housing the Vera Martin Lynch Memorial Library. Because of its proximity to the minister's study, this

* Later extended to two years.

space was considered a better location for the secretary's office. As part of this move, the church's library and archival collections were transferred to the Charles Dye Room, which thereupon was renamed "The Vera Martin Lynch Memorial Library-Charles and Eva Emery Dye Room." Martyn Frye and Margi McCue completed the move in the summer of 1998

As the first year of Ms Cook's interim ministry was nearing completion, it became clear that it would likely be many months before a settled minister was in the pulpit. For this reason the Church Council agreed to an extension of her interim tenure for another year. But in September, on the heels of this decision, Ms Cook received an offer to serve as minister for adults and families at the South Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut. She accepted the offer and her last Sunday service at Atkinson was conducted on November 24, 1996.

In January 1997, the Church Council agreed to have the pulpit temporarily filled by the Reverend Nan Geer, a Unitarian Universalist minister from the Pacific Northwest UUA District Office, in Woodenville, Washington. She would serve as part-time consulting minister from April to August, 1997, when it was anticipated that a new settled minister would take office.

In the meanwhile, the pulpit search committee began its efforts to find a settled minister. Its eleven original members had been elected at a congregational meeting on September 17, 1995. Chaired by Larry Krettler, the committee was faced with several substantial tasks before it could consider possible candidates. It would draft and circulate a survey of the congregation and conduct a series of "cottage meetings" in congregants' homes, all of which would be used to develop a profile of the congregation. After this phase was completed, the committee prepared a packet that

included: “ The survey results; information about the church and its surrounding community; where our church has been and where it hopes to go in the future; and a profile of what needs we will expect a settled minister to fulfill.”*

By the end of August, 1996, the committee was ready to begin exchanging packets with prospective ministers. The process of reviewing their packets continued until January 1997, when finalists were selected to be interviewed directly by the search committee. From the finalists’ interviews one would be selected as the committee’s recommended candidate. In February 1997, the Reverend Tim Haley, a Unitarian Universalist minister, was announced to be the committee’s choice. After a candidating week early in April the congregation voted overwhelmingly (66-1) to call Mr. Haley as its settled minister. He would occupy the Atkinson pulpit as settled minister on August 1, 1997.

Atkinson’s new minister was born in 1946 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Having been raised a Lutheran, he graduated from Valparaiso University in Indiana (1970), where he majored in religion, with minors in psychology and urban studies. After several years in the field of social services, he came west to attend Oregon’s Portland State University where he earned a master of social work degree (1978). It was in the course of his post-graduate experience working with the elderly that he connected with an earlier childhood inclination to pursue a career in the ministry.

In 1975, Mr. Haley met Melinda Glenn. They later married in 1981, while living in Portland, Oregon, where their two daughters, Kali and Kate, were born. In 1984, he entered Harvard Divinity School in Boston, Massachusetts, completing the three year program in 1987. During this time he also completed a two-year internship at the Follen

* Larry Krettler, “Pulpit Search Committee Report,” *Annual Reports 1995=1996*.

Church Society in nearby Lexington. Mr. Haley was ordained there on June 12, 1987. In August, Mr. Haley returned west to begin a one-year position as a New Congregational Organizer of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Washington County, Oregon. A year later (1988), he was called to the Unitarian Universalist Church in Reston, Virginia, where he remained for three years.

In 1991, the Glenn-Haley family decided to return to Portland, Oregon, the place where the family felt most at home. Mr. Haley returned to social services, working primarily in the hospice field. During this time, he was also called to serve as a consulting minister at two congregations: the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, Washington, and the fledgling Boones Ferry Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Both groups realized that he was in the search process of finding a full-time ministerial position. And that position did in fact materialize when he was called to serve as settled minister by Atkinson Memorial Church in April, 1997.