

## NORTH SHORE UNITARIAN CHURCH THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

In 1953 a score of Unitarians working under the sponsorship and the encouragement of Reverend Homer Jack, minister of the Evanston Unitarian Church, banded to form a new fellowship on the North Shore.

In February an advertisement was placed in the Highland Park newspaper announcing a meeting to organize a Unitarian Fellowship for anyone interested in liberal religion. About 20 people attended the meeting at the Highland Park Recreational Center.



By May, 1953, the North Shore Unitarian Fellowship was formally organized. From these seeds was born the church in which we gather today. An earnest and devoted group of people put in a considerable amount of time and effort to launch a fellowship north of Evanston. In mid-1954 a satisfactory site for both services and Sunday school was found at the Masonic Temple in Highland Park, IL (left). The Sunday school met partly in the basement with overflow at the Highland Park Recreational Center. The school program was flourishing with 60 children participating.

Reverend Hartley C. Ray, employed as a librarian in the Department of Education in Chicago, was anxious to serve our group to the best of his ability. Those present at the annual meeting agreed to pay the minister \$50 to speak twice a month.



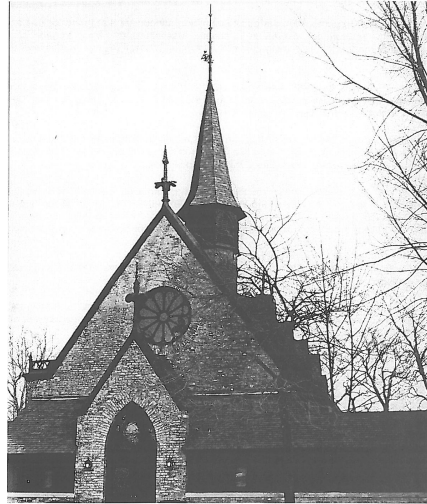
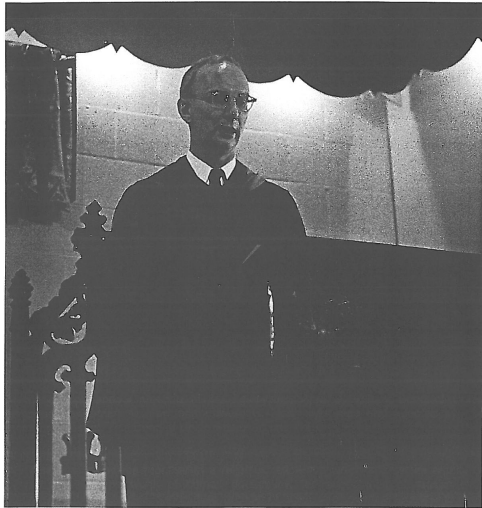
On January 1, 1955 Reverend Hartley C. Ray (pictured first left) was chosen full time minister, a position held until August 31st, when his appointment to Head Librarian at the Chicago Theological Seminary required all his time and efforts.

Reverend Carl E. Wennerstrom (pictured second left), Dean of Students at Meadville Theological School in Chicago, studying for his doctorate in Religion, volunteered to speak for several months until permanent arrangements could be made. In September

1955, Reverend Wennerstrom was called to conduct services without other ministerial duties.

At the second annual meeting of the Fellowship, April 19, 1955 a Bond of union was adopted and was used until 1980. It read: "We associate ourselves together in a religious fellowship which affirms the dignity of people, the supreme worth of human personality, the acceptance of reason over authority, and is dedicated to individual freedom of belief. We covenant together to seek truth with love, and to help one another."

The Fellowship applied for full status as a church in the American Unitarian Association in April, 1956. With the application in to American Unitarian Association, the pulpit committee announced that it had located an outstanding candidate for minister in Needham, Massachusetts, Russell Bletzer (below, left).



A letter arrived from the American Unitarian Association informing us that we were taken into the fold on May 23, 1956. A new site was found in the Chapel of Ferry Hall School in Lake Forest (IL) (above, right), which accompanied this announcement.

On January 7, 1957, North Shore Unitarian Church became our official name and on January 20, 1957, formal installation of the minister was held in the chapel. Every Unitarian minister in the Chicago-Wisconsin area participated in the ceremonies.

A capital fund drive in the fall of 1958 led to the purchase of the current site in 1959. The ground-breaking ceremony occurred on August 27, 1960. Present at the ceremony were Ellsworth Smith, regional director of the Western Unitarian Conference, and Randolph Hilton, dean of the Abraham Lincoln Center of Chicago, who played a key role in organizing the North Shore Unitarian Church.



During this time an article appeared in the Beacon, the church's newsletter, "The Importance of the North Shore Unitarian Church lies only partly in serving the needs of its parishioners. It also includes the interrelationship with the communities we serve." The striking example was the involvement of the minister and the church members making an impact upon the availability of new housing to all, irrespective of

creed or race. The Social Action Committee sponsored an open forum called "Open Occupancy" held at the church. Mr. Ringuette became chairman for Deerfield Citizens for Human Rights to address the discrimination of housing in that community.

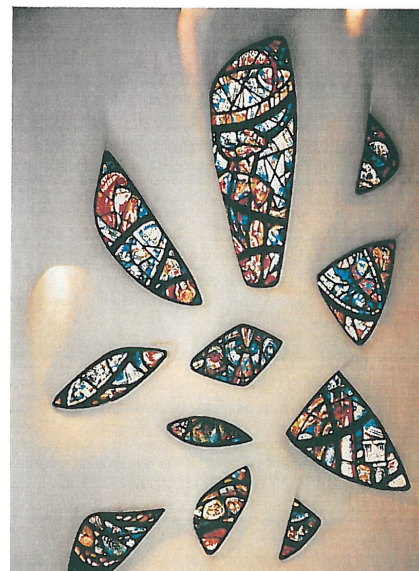
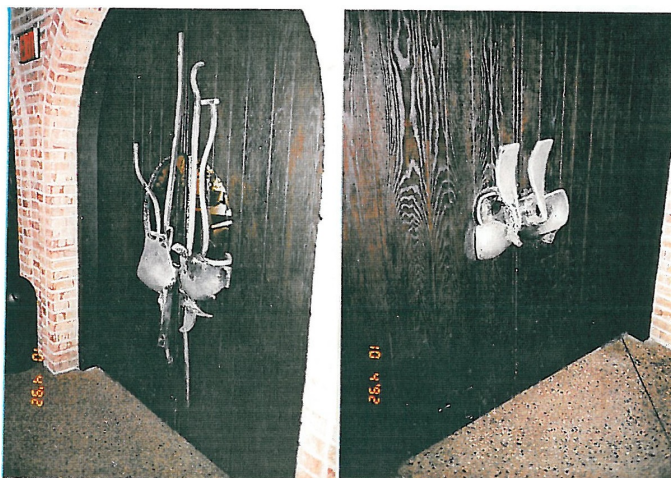
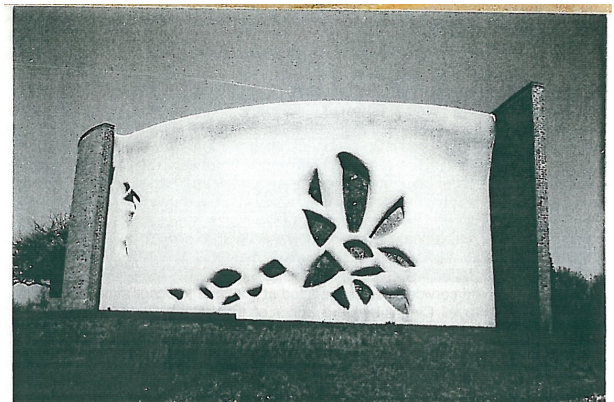
The new building was completed in May of 1961. Adlai Stevenson attended the first service.



Activities in the church flourished. October of 1963 initiated a Folk Song Workshop which met twice monthly to provide opportunity to play and sing together with some solo and "combo" work for those who would wish to try out a friendly audience. The Junior LRY (Liberal Religious Youth) presented the play, "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde as the feature attraction at the Church Education sponsored Family Supper. In June 1964 two new committees were announced - Dramatics involving theatrical productions and play reading, and Arts initiating art exhibits establishing an "Artist of the Month" tradition displaying a different member's art works on the fellowship room walls.

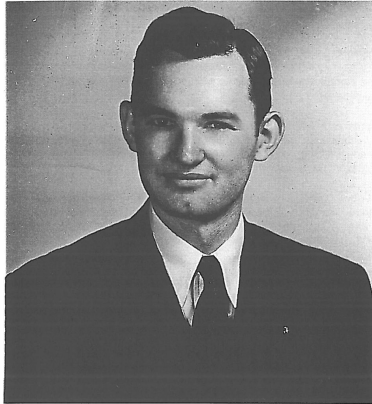
Also in 1964 a Building Committee was formed to secure the names of architects capable or desirous of doing church architecture, for the purpose of inviting them to make a presentation. The committee also made an in depth study of Sunday school attendance records to help determine room capacity needs. Haney Associates were requested by the board to launch a major building fund effort provide an additional capital fund of \$100,000, to be raised during a three year period, in order to complete the second stage of our long term building program envisioned many years ago. Membership stood at 310 individuals.

Ron Dirsmith was chosen as architect for the purpose of preparing a set of plans to be presented to the congregation for their approval at the April 1965 annual meeting. An important feature of the new building was the selection of a boulder to serve as the pulpit. Once placed on the ground, the sanctuary was built around the stone, which maintained its connection to the earth. The windows were made of fused glass, and created by artist Bob White. The new building was finally occupied in the 1968-69 church year.



Our newly completed church became the site for Camp Uni-Lake, a people-to-people project bringing together 100 African-Americans from Chicago's Lawndale area and a matching number of white suburbanites. The camp was sponsored by Urban Gateways, a private Chicago agency funded by private donations and federal War on Poverty funds. The goal of the day camp was a mutual cultural exchange. "We believe suburban children are as culturally isolated as city kids-both in their own ways," said Mrs. Jesse Woods, Gateways Director. North Shore Unitarian Church and Highland Park's Lakeside Congregation for Reformed Judaism joined forces to offer volunteers, both students and staffers.

When Reverend Russell Bletzer reported to the Annual Meeting in the 25th anniversary year of the church, he enumerated the following outstanding accomplishments: In 1977 the sponsorship of a Chilean family, the Bustos, who became economically independent in one year; obtaining

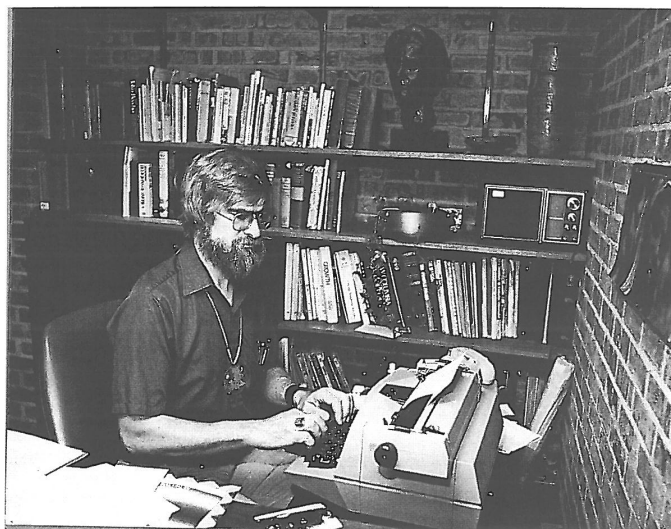


Stansfield Turner as speaker for NSUC; NSUC membership is up; the establishment of "Discovery" program for single people; and he especially wanted to thank the staff and volunteers. The announcement of his own plans for resignation on September 1, 1983 climaxed his report.

Reverend Homer Jack (then serving as Secretary-General of the World Conference on Religion and Peace) was invited to give the Sermon on June 17, 1979, to commemorate the founding of NSUC 25 years before (1953). Reverend Jack was enthusiastically supportive of the twelve members from his Evanston Church who started the fellowship.

Reverend Robert Holmes (above), served as our Interim Minister until September 1, 1980. There were at this time 317 members with 181 pledging units.

The Board decided to start the fall season without a minister and that guest ministers and members of the congregation could fill the pulpit until a new minister was installed.



Sam Bomar, chairman of the Grounds Committee, requested authorization to restore and rehabilitate the Prairie section of the church property. The restoration would include mowing a fireguard around the church; trimming the trees and shrubs; mowing a path through the prairie to permit viewing of the plants, "burning off" the prairie between March and April, and planting new prairie grasses in the spring of 1981. The Board agreed and asked that a sign be placed to designate the Prairie as a NSUC project.

A Celebration of the Installation of Reverend Richard Weston-Jones (above) as minister of the North Shore Unitarian Church took place on November 15, 1981. Reverend Mason McGinness, Interim Minister of the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale (IL) gave the installation sermon. Barbara Goodman, Chairman of the Board, called him to serve our church.

Music Sundays were established to occasionally take the place of the regular service. The first



was directed by Stephen Blackwelder May 2, 1983. Dance and poetry were also a part of the program. It was started as a means to raise funds for new choir music. In later years major choral works were performed adding instrumentalists. This became a tradition and the Choir Director plans a Music Sunday annually in the spring. The programs, directed by then Music Director, Wayland Rogers, were captured on CD's so they can be shared. Tom Bowling, violinist and teacher, organized an intergenerational orchestra made up of members of the congregation and children from the church school, who also add special music to the morning services from time to time.

Fifteen years after the installation of the fused glass windows we invited the inspired genius, Bob White, the creator of our windows and the lone master of the medium of fused glass, Guggenheim Fellow, and Tiffany Award winner, to celebrate in a ceremony on January 23, 1983.

Our Heart and Hand Auction and Dinner was started at this time to raise funds for the church. The auctioned items were donated by the members – dinner parties, a service (like window washing), tickets to a concert or play, art works, consultation on gardening, music lessons, and sailing trips. It soon became a popular and festive time to enjoy raising money.

The first Annual Philosofest for lay persons and ministers was announced to share conference with papers presented, followed by discussions to stimulate theological and personal exploration of beliefs and sources. The first all day event on a Saturday in October was capped by dinners in members' homes where discussions were continued.

A Search Committee was named by the Board of the Church, largely from the recommendations of the Church Education Board to find a new Religious Education (RE) Director. After a year and a half Helena Chapin of Watertown, MA, was selected and gave her first sermon on May 13, 1984. She began her first official duties in August of that year. She was called before the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association and given preliminary Fellowship as a Minister of Religious Education. Celebration of the ordination and installation of Helena Palmer Chapin as minister of Religious Education took place on February 10, 1985, at North Shore Unitarian Church.

In May 1988 Reverend Dick Weston-Jones wrote the Board of Trustees asking for his resignation from our ministry. Don Meter chairman said, "He has done so with grace and a positive spirit. We want to work with all of you and Dick to make his last months with us as good as they can be." Two open meetings were scheduled at the church where the Ministry and Human Resources Committee shared some of the information that led to the Board's

acceptance of his resignation. During this time the Board also accepted the resignation of Reverend Chapin.



The selection of the Reverend Doctor Josiah Bartlett (left) as Interim Minister began officially on September first, but he came in time to attend the Board Retreat in July, 1989 to become acquainted with the church. Bartlett has been a parish minister, Dean and President of Starr King School for the Ministry, and Founder of the Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA.

On June 3, 1990, almost \$60,000 had been raised to burn the mortgage. This meant that almost \$24,000 per year could be removed from the budget expense. The congregation unanimously approved the budget of \$191,000, the largest in NSUC's history. Most importantly the budget included funding for all the programs that the Board and the Congregation felt were

important to NSUC's future.



➤ A Ministerial Search resulted in an overwhelming approval by the Congregation to call Reverend Gary James (left) as our minister. Reverend James accepted our call and with his wife, Julie Martin, a naturopathic physician arrived February 29, 1992, to take up his duties at NSUC. His first Sunday Service was March 8, 1992.

In June 1993 Gaia Brown was chosen as the new Director of Religious Education. She came with a desire to try to talk with every church school family

which she anticipated would take her a full year.

In December 1993 The Board extended an offer to Mr. Gil Church, a ministerial student at Meadville-Lombard Theological School, to accept an Internship position under Reverend James's direction.

The highlight of 1994 was the Spring Congregational meeting approval of the Mission Covenant Statement for NSUC:

"The mission of the North Shore Unitarian Church is to encourage an individual and collaborative search for spiritual and religious truths, to nurture the lives of those who join us, to value the interdependent web that supports all life and to sustain and transform our living tradition. As a caring church community we enter into this covenant to: Welcome with loving friendship all who value the search for spiritual meaning. Strive to live in the spirit of unity while meeting the challenges of diversity. Grow through learning about and valuing the Judea-Christian and other spiritual traditions of the world. Engage in authentic and challenging dialogue about what we believe and how we want to live our lives. Celebrate and observe the experiences and mysteries of life through meaningful ritual and common worship that enriches us all. Minister to one another compassionately and joyfully as we experience life's passages and events. Affirm, nurture and mentor our children so they are well rooted in our shared values and traditions. Confront bigotry and injustice in our communities by taking direct action that represents our highest ideals and values of justice and freedom. Practice forgiveness and generosity of spirit and participate with love, goodwill, respect and kindness in the life and work of this church."

Due to continued growth in both the Religious Education programs and adult membership in 1994 we were running out of space! The Board considered this a "wonderful" problem and chose to deal with the challenge by appointing two committees. A short term planning committee to deal with immediate issues affecting the church within the next year, and a long term planning committee to deal with issues from two to five years in the future. Short term planning committee members addressed solutions to overcrowding of the parking lot, the RE program and the sanctuary on special Sundays. Their recommendation was that we operate starting in September of 1995 with double services and with double RE programs on Sunday mornings.

At the congregational meeting on May 21, 1995, members of NSUC voted to accept working with the "People Helping People" programs as its first all church project. The endorsement provided an opportunity for NSUCers of all ages to work together for social outreach, providing nourishing, hot quality meals to some of Chicago's homeless once a month during the colder months, on Sunday when the nearby shelter is closed. Typically 300-400 people were fed.



In September 1997, we welcomed Clare Butterfield as our Intern Minister for two years on a half time basis. She was attending Meadville-Lombard Theological School and had three more years to complete her studies for the Master of Divinity degree. She gave her first sermon September 28, 1997.

NSUC began contributing to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, Open Door, and A Safe Place, an effort that continues to the present. The church also became a Welcoming Congregation and a received its Green Sanctuary Certification during this time period.

In May the reported membership was 520 pledging friends and when including non- pledging families in the RE Program was 550, a testimonial to eight years of leadership of RE Director, Gaia Brown.

Upon the retirement of our Religious Education Director, Bette Rotert was appointed as Religious Education Administrator to prepare the RE Program, plan curriculum, recruit and train teacher teams for the 2001-2002 church year.

A review was made of the expansion project as outlined in the January 1996, workshop to construct a workable timeline and organizational structure for the expansion project as of July 18, 2001. The time line suggested was from August 2001 to the fall of 2003 which included goals for Project Committees; Membership Growth and Development, Program Planning, Five Year Financial Projection, Architect's preliminary drawings and their review and discussions. Feasibility study and Architect's redraw (if necessary), Capital Fund Drive and congregational meeting to authorize building construction, with the hope that construction would begin in the spring of 2003. The Resulting Capital Drive was successful, but not adequate to fund an expansion of the current facilitates. Instead the Building Committee concentrated on restoring our beloved building and updating the facilitates to meet current standards.

Jacquie Meli joined our community in September 2002 as Intern Minister to fulfill our role as a teaching church. She served NSUC three days a week until Spring of 2003.

Our history has been enriched through several long-term programs. The annual spring juried Art Fair brings many area artisan's work to the North Shore and provides the church with a fun fundraising opportunity. The other annual event is the Rummage Sale, which provides many low-cost items and clothing to those in need. The resulting funds from the sale are distributed to area service agencies.



Reverend Gary James served for 21 years. He departed in 2013 in a negotiated resignation. The following year we operated without a settled or interim minister, using guest ministers and other speakers. This allowed us to be able to offer and pay our departing minister one additional year of salary and benefits as part of his resignation package and in recognition of his many years of service to our congregation.

From 2014-2017, we had a professional Interim Minister, Reverend Marlene Walker (above). Working with Reverend Walker, this period was a time of self-assessment, change, and growth through which our congregation looked with enthusiasm to the mutual process of identifying and selecting our next settled minister.

There were also other staff changes in that time. Misha Sanders, a third-year student at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, served as ministerial intern. Meredith Olsen joined the staff as an interim Life Span Religious Education director. And after the retirement of our long-time Music Director Wayland Rogers, Stephen Blackwelder returned to NSUC as Music Director. In 2017, Jonathan Schlesinger was hired as Education Coordinator.



With a 99% vote of approval, the congregation extended a ministerial call to Reverend Lucas Hergert (left) in 2017. He holds degrees from Harvard and the Pacific School of Religion, and had previously served the Unitarian Universalist Church in Livermore.

With a gratitude for its history and hope for its future, the congregation looks forward to writing its next chapter.

### **Our Church Historian**

Much of the content for the “Church History” is the contribution of the longtime Church Historian, Shirley Aiken.