

First Unitarian Church (Portland)

By Mary Bothwell

In 1866, the Ladies Sewing Circle, a small group of Portland women from the New England states, led by Mary Frazier, raised \$2,000 for a church that reflected their belief in liberal Christianity. They bought land at Southwest 7th and Yamhill and built a structure in 1867. A young minister from St. Louis, Thomas Lamb Eliot (1841-1936), arrived that December to start the first Unitarian Church, known as Church of Our Father, later called First Unitarian Church. By the end of the decade, the congregation had outgrown the building, and in 1879, a new building, designed in the Victorian Gothic-style by Peabody and Sterns of Boston, was erected next to the original chapel.

When Reverend Eliot retired in 1893, he was succeeded by Reverend Earl Morse Wilbur and, in 1898, by Reverend William G. Eliot, Jr. Reverend Eliot led the congregation through World War I and the Great Depression. He was also pastor when the church moved to a new building at Southwest 12th and Salmon, designed by Jameson Parker in the Georgian style.

In 1934, Reverend Eliot retired and Dr. Richard M. Steiner was called from Grinnell College in Iowa. Steiner used bequests and other donations during his tenure to increase the church's property holdings. He also strengthened the religious education program by hiring a professional religious educator, Gertrude McIntosh.

In the summer of 1965, a fire set by an arsonist destroyed the sanctuary and the roof of the First Unitarian Church building. The congregation had to decide whether or not to remain a downtown church, as more Unitarians were moving to the suburbs. The vote was 140 to 62 in favor of remaining in the city of Portland. After overseeing the restoration of the property, Dr. Steiner decided to retire.

A series of short-term ministers served until 1970, when Dr. Alan Deale was appointed. During his tenure, which lasted until 1990, the demographics of the congregation changed, and there was a renewed emphasis on religious education. Reverend Marguerite Hessler Deale, Dr. Deale's wife, was responsible for religious education for children and program development for adults.

During Dr. Deale's tenure, the congregation purchased several buildings near the church, and First Unitarian continued to support Outside-In, a medical-social program begun in 1968 for homeless and disaffected youth.

The church called Dr. Marilyn Sewell in 1992. The beginning of her ministry coincided with the appearance of an anti-gay ballot measure in Oregon. What had been a church of approximately 700 members suddenly almost doubled in size, with people looking for a liberal religious home for themselves and their children. The church hired an assistant minister, Reverend Thomas Disrud, and a minister for social justice, Kate Lore, as well as additional staff for religious education and the music program.

The growth of the congregation prompted the church to buy and renovate the vacant Nazarene church next door as the sanctuary. A bequest from the Buchan family supported the renovation of the original First Unitarian Church, which is now known as the Eliot Chapel; the building of the Buchan Building, an addition to house religious education classrooms; and the Thirteen Salmon Center, a day center for homeless families and children.

Dr. Sewell was a thought-provoking preacher and writer who reached out to many different groups in the church and who spoke publicly on peace and social justice issues. After seventeen years in the First Unitarian pulpit, she retired in June 2009.

Sources

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