

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast: Its First Ten Years, 1994-2004

(Liz Fitzsimmons, 2/28/2024)

EARLY BELFAST UNITARIAN AND UNIVERSALIST HISTORY

Although this church was the first Unitarian Universalist church in Belfast, it was not the first congregation to identify as Unitarian or Universalist. In 1809 an itinerant minister held a Universalist service at a private home in Belfast. A Universalist Society formed in 1824, and a pastor served the group until 1826. After several years with no preaching, the Society reorganized and in 1829 erected a church building at the corner of Court and Spring Streets. The Society was incorporated as the First Universalist Parish in Belfast in 1864. According to the authors of *History of Belfast in the 20th Century*, it was considered the liberal church for the working class. The congregation disbanded in 1929, sold its church building. In 2024 the Belfast Maskers theater group owns the building.

Unitarians emerged from the congregation of the First Congregational Church, which was organized in Belfast in 1796. In 1818 the congregation built a beautiful Federal style church on the corner of Church and Spring Streets. However, two years later, dissent within the congregation caused major schism. As Joseph Williamson wrote in the *History of the City of Belfast*, on "20 May 1820, during a period when a 'Unitarian controversy was sweeping... over all the New England churches,' the First Church suffered 'an irreconcilable division of religious belief.'" The Unitarian group separated from the parish and organized into a new and independent congregation. The Unitarians continued to worship in the 1818 church while the more orthodox group relocated and in 1831-32 built a new church, known as the North Church, on Market Street between Church and High Streets. The two churches reunited in 1921 in the First Church of Belfast, United Church of Christ. The local chapter of the American Legion bought the North Church and still owns the building in 2024.

Nationally, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1961, and 141,685 members of 895 congregations became one. Until the founding of UUCB in 1994, no UU church existed in Waldo County.

Beginnings of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast

In 1993 several local residents began to talk about the possibility of birthing a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Belfast area. The first meeting, at Douglas Coffin and Kerstin Engman's home in Belfast, drew 22 people. Douglas placed a notice or ad in a local newspaper for the gatherings, and the next one attracted 64 participants. Clearly there was interest in potential local congregation. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) thought the demographics and location were favorable for a new church and encouraged the initiative. As one of the founding members said, "Our vision was to be a fully functioning liberal religious presence in our community with a minister, an active RE program, a terrific choir, social events, services every Sunday, and maybe, maybe someday our own building."

Linda Buckmaster and Jocelyn Morrison attended UUA New Congregation Development Training. Rev. Glenn Turner, Extension Minister for UUA's Northeast District, provided guidance and helped the Belfast group secure matching funds from UUA to purchase hymnals. After the organization of a Steering Committee, chaired by John E. Marshall, objectives and a timetable were set. The Belfast group had four initial priorities: It would at first be a lay-led church, with worship services that were varied in structure and format; music would be an important component of worship; a good RE program would be a key to sustaining growth; and UUCB should be seen locally as contributing to the intellectual and cultural life of the Belfast community. As the Belfast UUs set forth on the path to official UUA recognition, Maine UU churches sent letters of support to UUA. Viewing themselves as big siblings, the Ellsworth and Rockland UU churches signed covenanting agreements, and the Rockland donated \$500. UUA provided a \$1000 grant; and the founding Belfast group committed to undertaking its first canvass.

On February 13, 1994 ,49 people attended the first formal worship service at the Belfast Dance Studio. The Belfast UUs held a Charter Sunday Celebration on November 4, 1994, in the Abbott Room of the Belfast Free Library, at which 48 individuals signed the Membership Book. Momentum toward becoming a full-fledged Unitarian Universalist church grew as members began to share responsibilities for growing the membership and developing a regular program for Sunday services, including identifying speakers and discussion facilitators. Usually, a member of the group spoke on a theme or topic of their choice twice a month, and two Sundays a month were devoted to Discussion Forums. Sometimes guest speakers participated in the Sunday programs. Paula Roberts began directing a choir.

During the months leading to formal UUA affiliation, the Belfast congregation worked on a governance structure. It approved by-laws and the formation of a Parish Committee. Members were John Marshall, President; Judith Grace, Vice-President; Douglas Coffin, Clerk; and Members at-Large Charles Courant, Warren Greeley, Michele Schmidt, Jill Weber, and Linda Buckmaster. Committees were created: Worship Services, Facilities, Hospitality, Music, Finance, Membership, Congregational Development, RE, and Social Responsibility. (In 1999 a by-laws revision changed the governance mode to include 3 officers, 5 representatives of standing committees/functional areas--RE, Social Action, Membership and Development, Services and Finance, and 3 at-large members.) - The Parish Committee proposed a budget and pledge drive. Members approved of the proposals at its first congregational meeting on December 4, 1994.

The congregation also adopted a mission:

We, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast covenant as a community to share our diverse spiritual paths; to communicate with each other in the spirit of fellowship; to celebrate our relationship with the natural world' to quest for meaning in life; and to spread the light of hope and justice to the world around us.

Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Board of Trustees unanimously voted to approve UUCB's application for affiliation on October 21, 1995. This vote affirmed "our connection with the historical and current world-wide community of activists seeking

personal intellectual and spiritual growth in the context of shared communication and a commitment to progressive social action and justice.” Belfast became affiliated with the UUA’s Northeast District.

The first operating budget of \$12,693 included \$150 per guest speaker, piano rental, \$60 per week for an accompanist, and expenses for printing, conference fees, congregational development, and social action, plus a contingency fund for a possible surplus, which could go toward hiring a part-time minister at some point. The first annual Every Member and Friend canvass raised \$12,928 from 53 pledge units.

UUCB BECOMES ESTABLISHED

The nascent church’s profile began to rise in 1995. The opportunity arose to hire a quarter-time minister. Jill Saxby filled that position. She was a recent graduate of Bangor Theological Seminary who had been trained by UUA in Extension Ministry, a program on starting and growing UU churches. She was in Belfast three days a month, during which she led her monthly worship service, met with committees, led adult programs, and worked on church leadership and growth, including “The New U.”

Importantly, in 1996 UUCB held a church retreat on long-range planning, and began work on a plan to increase attendance, membership, and the number and amount of pledges, address space needs, develop fundraising events, grow children’s programs, and consider other opportunities and challenges. A Capital Construction/Facilities Fund was created through a gift from a visitor..

In 1997 the Belfast congregation was chosen by the Northeast District as the beneficiary of its Giving to Grow Program. The program, intended to help “vibrant” churches grow, provided a grant and funds, partly raised from UU friends in the Northeast District.; UUCB had to provide some matching funds. This program allowed UUCB to hire a full-time minister from the Extension Intern Program for one year. Jennifer Innis, in her last year at Harvard Divinity School, assumed that position in August 1997.

Focus groups took place in the fall of 1998 in preparation another long-range planning retreat. As the church grew, Belfast Unitarian Universalists participated in annual retreats with other UU congregations at the Hersey Retreat in Stockton Springs. The oceanfront property at French's Point dated from the late 1800s, when a prominent member of the Bangor Unitarian Church developed it as a summer retreat for its members and camp for children. (*Did it become a UUA property?*) The facility was a wonderful resource for the young Belfast church. It could use the facility for its own retreats, picnics, and programs as well as participate in many other programs for UU adults and youth. The Retreat closed in 2003. Today it is a resort.

UUCB hired ????? as its first administrative in ?????. Rudy Nashan next filled the position, and Maret Knight came on board in 2002.

Ministry and Worship

At the end of Jill Saxby's tenure in the summer of 1996, Rev. Katherine "Kitsy" Winthrop, a part-time UU minister in Saco and Biddeford, became UUCB's quarter-time minister. From September 1996 until summer 1997, she came to Belfast twice a month and spoke at one of each month's Sunday services. Weekly attendance in 1996 averaged about 60 people at worship services, with 30 participating in the Discussion Forums. The annual Flower Communion, originating in Romanian Unitarianism, took root in 1996. Monthly intergenerational services and evening summer services in members' homes and yards, followed by a potluck supper, debuted in 1997. Sunday Discussion Forums gave way in autumn 1999 to weekly worship services, some lay led and others with guest speakers. During UUCB's early years, Jan Anderson, Linda Buckmaster, Jane Dopheide, Kathy Muzzy, Sumner Roberts, Mike and Margie Shannon, and Judith Simpson, and other members frequent speakers and worship leaders. Rudy Nashan began recording services in 2001, and members could borrow the recordings.

In late 1999 the congregation discussed whether UUCB needed to have a minister; some members liked the lay-led services, and many agreed that a minister should lead only one service a month. That year a UUA training session allowed speakers and potential worship leaders to hone their skills. The 2001 budget included \$13,000 for a part-time minister. Pam Gross, a Bangor Theological Seminary divinity student and

Director of RE at the Bangor UU Church, became UUCB's next quarter-time minister. She stayed for 9 years. Pam started the Small Group ministry and led a weekend spiritual retreat not long after her arrival. The Services Committee organized a "How to Lead a Service" program for congregants. Once-a-month forums after worship services provided an opportunity for dialogue about a variety of ideas and issues.

In 2002, after UUCB had a permanent location. summer services took place on Sunday evenings at the church. The regular church year began in September with a traditional water service, which allowed members of the congregation, to share something about their summer. Concerns were expressed about the length and placement in the services of "Joys and Concerns." The holiday season brought an intergenerational pageant titled "Would You Like to Hold the Baby," a service of carols and stories on Christmas Eve, and participation in the New Year's Eve Community Interfaith Service.

Paula Roberts stepped down as choir director in 2002 or 2003, and Lila Nation took over. A Music Committee came into being. For a time UUCB had a flute ensemble and a quartet as well as the choir, and guest musicians sometimes played at services. Music was important to many in the congregation. In addition to music on Sunday, for a time Rudy Nashan led twice-a-month listening sessions with live and recorded music, and the church hosted regular coffee houses and performances.

RE

The first RE program was a single mixed age group, but soon a Youth Group for teens formed. Programs attracted 15 to 20 kids a week. Linda Buckmaster led a tour of Boston UU sites for Belfast teens in 1995. The youth began Guest at Your Table, learned about Outright, a program for gay and lesbian teens, and began a Hire-a-Teen initiative. Teens participated in retreats with other area UU youth at the Hersey Retreat and other churches, including an overnight at the Belfast Curling Club. Space limitations prevented UUCB from developed RE classes for various age groups at first. However, before long the Dance Studio, across from the library, offered additional space for RE. More space became available when UUCB rented the adjacent building. Jane Dopheide was the first RE Director. The development of a consistent program to serve all ages hit snags. It seemed to be a perennial problem then, as now, to attract

RE teachers. In 19?? the church budget included an amount to pay teachers a small stipend. The first age-defined RE classes were Pre-School, Youngers, Middles, and Teens. Some of the teens tended the preschoolers.

In 2001 the Life Span Committee and Education Committee formed to “promote and coordinate educational programming and intergenerational events consistent with UU principles and sources.” Adult programs included New Member classes, a Couple Relationship Series, a course on UU Identity, and “Parents as Resident Theologians,” among others. A “Handbook for Children and Youth” and a lending library debuted. In March 2002 UUCB hosted the annual Spring Renewal conference for over 30 Maine UU religious educators. In 2004 a Safe Congregations Committee began to develop policies and procedures to help ensure safety and right relations for children and adults; RE components included healthy relations and self-esteem.

As an example of UUCB’s commitment and closeness to its young members, for several years volunteers sent care packages of treats to former RE students in college or new jobs away from home.

Spiritual Life

From the beginning UUCB offered spiritual and personal growth opportunities, including discussions within the congregation and encouragement to attend multi-church workshops and retreats at the UU Hersey Retreat Center. Among the early programs were “Toward the Ecstatic” monthly circles, a Women’s Spirituality Group, and “Rise Up and Call Her Name,” an exploration of the goddess figure.

Discussions on Buddhism led to the establishment of a regular Friday morning Sanga at UUCB. For a few years there were weekly prayer meetings. An “Explorations of Faith series,” a “Parents as Resident Theologians” program, and a series of “Jesus before Christianity: A Non-dogmatic Exploration” seminars led by Rev. Dick Snyder, a member (*or active friend*) of UUCB, enriched church offerings in early years. UUCB collaborated with Coyote Moon with to present a 5-part video series, “The Power of Now and Stillness Speaks.”

Social Activities and Fundraising Events

Social events helped create connections and roots in the UU community and attracted non-members, too. The first Winter Solstice Celebration took place at Toddy Pond School in December 1994. Since then, it has been held nearly every year, with proceeds going to a different non-profit organization that serves Waldo County residents in need. The venue for many years was the Blue Goose in Northport, but as of 2022 it takes place in the UUCB sanctuary. Carousel dinners in members' homes have continued for many years. Family Fun Nights, Sunday potluck lunches, picnics, a bridge group, yoga classes, intergenerational Full Moon walks, visits to the animals at Paula and Sumner Roberts' farm, sledding parties, film nights, annual Night Tree celebrations to give edible treats, coffeeshouses, and other events provided social interaction. UUCB had a very full calendar from its earliest years.

As fundraisers in its first decade, UUCB held an art auction and an annual auction of donated goods and services. Jane Dopheide and Judith Grace organized yard sales. They also launched the first clothing sale, which was an annual event for many years. Once it had a permanent space, UUCB hosted New Year's Eve performances and sold meals for concertgoers at New-Years-by-the-Bay, the latter a fundraiser that continues in 2024.

Social Justice and Environmentalism

Social justice has been an active focus of UUCB from the beginning. In 2001 the Church Council adopted the UUA Statement of Conscience. For several years the Social Responsibility Committee raised awareness and spurred involvement in the "Maine Won't Discriminate" initiative to defeat Maine's Anti-Civil Rights referendum. A "Welcoming Congregation" workshop series preceded UUCB's designation by UUA as a Welcoming Congregation. UUCB participated in People to People in the 1990s. For several years members worked with other churches, organizations and individuals on the Waldo County Homeless Youth Safe-Homes Network, which sought ways and funds to provide housing for homeless teenagers in Waldo County. The UU Funding Program awarded \$7000 to UUCB for the development, training, and supervision of safe home providers. The Maine Community Foundation awarded a grant, and the program

attracted additional funds. The initiative was some moving forward when the State withdrew a \$150,000 appropriation for a homeless youth program from its budget.

UUCB volunteers began to assist with the Food Pantry at the Methodist Church. Guest-at-Your-Table, in which donations are directed to children in need, took root. UUCB played a role in combatting institutional racism and hate crimes, Clean Clothes legislation, Green Power initiatives, Diapers for Haiti, and support for the Somali community in Lewiston. The Social Justice Committee was active in raising community awareness of domestic violence and supporting Restorative Justice for Waldo County. In 2002 UUCB joined with the Peace and Justice Group of Waldo County and Belfast Area Friends Meeting to sponsor the Mid-Coast Peace and Justice Film Series.

Green Sanctuary discussions began in 2002, and UUCB filed its application for certification by UUA in January 2003. It was approved, and UUCB began an active program to raise awareness and promote activism around important environmental issues. Environment themed worship services and RE programs, development of the Midcoast Time Dollar Network, and purchase of an energy efficient refrigerator and institution of recycling in the church kitchen were among early Green Sanctuary focuses.

Finances and Canvass

UUCB's proposed operating budget increased from \$12,693 in 1994-95 to \$23,186, which included \$2700 for a minister, for the 1996 fiscal year. The canvass target that year was 75 units. The \$41,375 operating budget proposed for 1998 included stipends for a RE director and an office assistant. That budget was predicated on reaching a \$26,000 canvass goal, a large increase over the previous year. In 2001 an outside consultant trained canvassers. In 2002, the year when UUCB began a Capital Campaign, the church set an operating budget goal that was not dependent on fundraising events; that income would be directed to the future growth of the congregation. The canvass goal was \$46,000.

Communications

Douglas Coffin began publishing a UUCB newsletter in 1994. Beginning with 4 pages, it grew to 8 pages each month. It included dates, speakers, and topics for Sunday services and Discussion Forums; announcements and comments on church affairs from the Parish Committee (later the Church Council); a "Who's Who & Who to Call" directory; descriptions of upcoming programs and events; reports on RE and Youth Group curricula and activities; reflections from the minister, mention and updates on and friends' hospitalizations, family deaths, and the like; announcements of members' birthdays; and other news. Sometimes there were biographies of new members. Readers were often entertained by a humorous drawing by Douglas on a relevant subject. Most newsletters had information, updates, and calls for action by social justice advocates and organizations with which UUCB collaborated or members were involved.

Bill Dopheide compiled the first member directory in 1996. UUCB launched a website in 1998, the fourth Maine UU Church to do so. It provided information about the church, minister, committees, services, RE, events, and other topics and was updated once a month. Between January 1, 1999, and July 1, 2000, the website received over 1000 visits, averaging over 50 a month. In 2004 an electric bulletin board began for announcements. Members and friends could receive monthly newsletters as attachments to emails, although they also received them in the mail. Although there was no formal process for photographing programs and event, a camera was made available for who wanted to do so.

UUCB introduced brochures about the church and its RE programs. It received permission from the Maine Department of Transportation to erect signs along the major roads entering Belfast, as other churches had.

Space Concerns

As the congregation and church functions grew, its space needs increased. Clearly, it needed a place for several RE classes, meeting space, and a minister's office. The Dance Studio, across the street from the library, provided some RE space but not enough. When the building next to the Dance Studio, on the corner of High and

Pendleton Lane, became available, UUCB rented it for a year. With a banner in the window, it provided a visible presence on a main city thoroughfare as well as rooms for a variety of uses. That space became unavailable to UUCB in 2001.

In 1998 UUCB learned that the Belfast Free Library planned renovations that would make the Abbott Room unavailable for a prolonged period of time after April 1. Services moved to the Dance Studio and in November 1999 to the East Side School. Although the Abbott Room would again be available after construction, the required move prompted serious discussions and explorations of possible permanent locations. Options for rentals, purchase, or even building were all on the table. The Abbott Room was available again in September 2000, and the congregation moved back there for Sunday services.

A PERMANENT HOME FOR UUCB IN 2002

In June 2001 Belfast's Methodist Church moved to its new building in East Belfast, leaving its Miller Street church building vacant. UUCB rented the building that year, and the Methodists made some repairs to improve safety. UUCB began a strategic planning process in March 2002. The Church Council began to consider whether to buy the building. Considerable discussion, financial scrutiny and projections, and data analysis took place, and the Council presented a proposal to purchase to the congregation on April 21. Members received a ballot that asked if UUCB should purchase the building, provided an adequate financial package can be developed by the Church Council. A second question asked each voter for a financial commitment. Forty members voted in favor of the purchase, with 2 individuals opposed and 2 abstentions. The two churches entered into a purchase contract on May 9. The price was \$80,000. A local bank had approved a mortgage, and an anonymous donation of \$2000 began a \$75,000 Capital Campaign. By summer \$40,000 was in hand for a down payment. At the time the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast had 72 active members.

The church was a substantial building that had served the local Methodist congregation since 1858, when it moved from its original chapel at the corner of Cross and Miller Street. The Methodists laid the cornerstone of their new Miller Street church on August 25, 1858. The basement vestry was completed in time for a sermon to be

preached on the last day of December that year. Construction of the church continued, and the building was dedicated on October 11, 1859. The \$9800 cost was covered by the sale of the chapel and of pews in the new church to congregants and by large and small donations, including collections taken at the Methodist Campground at Bayside in Northport. The new brick edifice had a spire 158 feet high, 80 pews in the second floor sanctuary, and a melodeon. The Hon. Jacob Sleeper of Boston made a gift of a 1500-ton bell for the belfry in 1869. (It is now at the new Methodist Church on Mill Street.) The spire succumbed to rot in 1996. In 1931 the church building was renovated to accommodate a smaller congregation, create better accessibility, and lower heating costs. Pews and the organ were moved to a new first floor sanctuary, and the second floor sanctuary's ornate vaulted tin ceiling sealed off.