

“Who Are We”

Rev. Chris Rothbauer and Will Cantrell

Keweenaw Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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“Where Do We Come From?” by Will Cantrell

Who are we? Now is balanced on the knife edge between the past and the present. Who we are is understood by understanding who we have been and looking ahead to who we might be.

Let us begin by looking back. Who have we been?

Let us first begin by acknowledging that when we refer to the Keweenaw Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in the singular we are using a shorthand. How many KUUFs have there been? How many are there now? There’s no simple answer to those questions. The Fellowship, when it was founded, is not the Fellowship as it is now. This statement is so obvious that it borders on vacuity. Of course there have been changes.

The majority of the members of the Fellowship have become members since I became a member in 2003 and that was 15 years into the life of the organization. There is also continuity. There are members here today who have been members from the beginning.

Why was the Fellowship founded? Who were we then? As I understand, from talking to many of the founding members, they wanted liberal religious education for their children as well as just a general liberal religious home in the Keweenaw. The Fellowship at that time was predominantly humanist. They met two Sundays per month. (We will talk about where they met at the end...) For a while, student ministers from Meadville Lombard in Chicago came up once per month to conduct services.

That Fellowship made it a priority to have a minister. (They were also talking about a building of our own.) As you might imagine the expenses at the time were modest (Modest but not zero.) Those members set aside money every year over and above what was needed. They are one of the reasons that we have the solid financial position that we do.

In the early 2000s, we learned that a UU minister was living in Minocqua and might be interested in serving in a part time role. That was the beginning of Rev. Sydney Morris' service with our Fellowship. She was our first settled minister. When she went from 1/3 time to full time, the Fellowship's budget increased by 25%. A jump that big in a single year is daunting. (I was daunted. I was the Treasurer at the time.) We surmounted that challenge.

When Rev. Morris left for a congregation in Oregon, we were without a minister for 6 months. Rev. Gabi arrived after having been delayed just outside of Munising. It was -10 the day she moved in. Members of the Fellowship shuttled boxes from the moving truck into her rented house. Most of that year, the Search Committee spent in following the UUA's protocols and putting together our search packet. Rev. Rothbauer started in August of 2015. (I've skimmed over the recent history since many of you have seen it for yourself.)

I have deliberately left out our relationship to the denomination in all of this. Rev. Rothbauer will follow this discussion with that, but first, let's play a little Q&A...

Who is the first signature in the red book?

(Mention that Karen Kraft is #6, she was a teenager at best...)

Who are the two newest signatures in the book?

Where have we met (MTU preschool, upstairs at BHK, here)

There have been 2 pair of presidents who shared the same last name. Who are they?

Bill and Barry Fink

Keith Johnson and John Johnson

When did KUUF become a Welcoming Congregation?

Which committees are explicitly mentioned in KUUF's bylaws?

Committee on Ministry, Nominating Committee, Finance Committee

What has the Fellowship done?

"A Microcosm of Brilliant Imperfection" by Rev. Chris Rothbauer

Occasionally I hear someone who, when they hear about our movement's very imperfect history, expresses surprise that we have just as many incidents to be sorry for as anyone else. It's easy to believe that a liberal, progressive, and inclusive denomination is somehow better than everyone else, and that we are utopia, here on Earth. I usually respond that our movement is full of human beings, with all the flaws that come with them. People are products of their time and culture, and there's no escaping that history will have negative things to say even about current Unitarian Universalists and our failure to live fully into our professed values.

Take the women of the Iowa Sisterhood for example. These were women, mostly Unitarians and a few Universalists, who felt the call to ministry and sought to fulfill this calling by seeking to enter seminary and become ordained. At that time, though, female ministers were almost completely unheard of, and most of them were denied the opportunity to become ministers because the denominational authorities could not see past the norms of their times. Even the few who did gain ordination, such as Olympia Brown, the first woman to be ordained by a mainline denomination in America, they were all too often subsequently rejected by the churches they served, which were not ready to move beyond the comfort of what they considered to be normal.

They were imperfect products of the environment they existed in, and made mistakes just as any of us would have in their shoes.

The point isn't to dwell on these imperfections but, rather, what can we learn from them? When I study the mistakes of our past, I want to know how to avoid making mistakes going forward. In the case of the Iowa Sisterhood, it's clear that many very capable ministers were prevented from fully realizing their potential. Many of them planted churches, mostly in Iowa and the Dakotas, some of which still exist today. Their contributions to these communities is unsurpassed, and there's little doubt today that the parish is where they belonged.

Indeed, we find these examples all around our movement. In August, I talked about how slow our faith was to understand Black Power. And it is a sad indictment indeed that eugenics, with all its racist, sexist, and classist assumptions, was advanced by Unitarianism, perhaps epitomized by Supreme Court Justice and Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes's quote that "[t]hree generations of imbeciles are enough."

The point isn't to demonize us; plenty of other faiths and organizations share as much culpability as we do. The point is that, for all our advancements, every organization, Unitarian Universalists included, find it difficult, even when they profess a position, to fully embrace it, at least at first. We stumble and stumble and hurt a lot of people in the process and, if we're lucky, we come out at the end better than we were before, but never quite finished with the work.

That's the thing about Utopia: it's never quite here, always on the horizon, a few more wins from materializing.

Our movement, like all other movements throughout history, is a microcosm of brilliant imperfection, constantly striving to redefine ourselves in order to bring in those whom we've previously left behind. We can look at it as exhausting work given that it means our movement is

always striving to be better than it was previously, or we can look at it as holy work, work that brings us closer to the idea of the Beloved Community, one where all are included, where every person has their own place at the table of love and acceptance.

Though the events of the national movement may seem distant to many of us at time, let us not forget that the movements successes and foibles are also our successes and foibles. We do not exist in a vacuum, and it behooves us to pay attention to both the good parts and the bad about our local and national history. It may be hard, even painful, to do so, but there is no growth as long as we believe, even so slightly, the myth that utopia is here, now, within our movement. We may not know how history will judge us thirty years from now, but we can act the best we can to be a people who are always reexamining our past and facing our present in order to shape the future.

“Where Are We Going?” by Will Cantrell

Here I pose questions. I cannot presume to answer them. I am only a single voice in the chorus of what we are and will become.

We, the people in this room, and others who are not here for whatever reason, are KUUF now. It is we who will decide what KUUF is now because we are what it shall become.

Are we a church? Some of us have been scarred by organized religion in the past for a panoply of reasons. Are we defined by those past experiences or shall we reclaim that space? This sacred space (and whether it is sacred is even a question to hold...)... What will we do with it? Is it a place of comfort? Is it a space for growth? Will we leave here feeling satisfied or with a sense of unease? And where might that unease come from?

What do you remember from this time?

I remember times of sorrow and of joy... births and deaths.

I recall celebrations.

I recall homilies, sermons, whatever we wish to call them that I disagreed with, but that prompted me to think. Rev. Morris and Michael Cervetes, a visiting minister whose name I cannot recall and the doctrine of just war, Rev. Gabi and the story of Mary on Easter Sunday, and Rev. Chris' use of the Walking Dead in their first sermon during candidating week.

James Luther Adams said, "Church is where we practice being human."

What kind of humans will we be?