

A Partial History of Mt Vernon Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Jefferson County, Illinois

On Sunday, March 28, 2010, Rev, Bill Sasso led a Sunday service at the Mt. Vernon Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in celebration of its fifth birthday. As part of the service, those present created a sketch of those five years, and this narrative attempts to re-tell the memories shared in that gathering.

The beginnings of the Mt Vernon Unitarian Universalist Fellowship were internal to the central figure in its formation, Mr. Randy Farrar of Mt. Vernon, Illinois. In June, 2000, Randy began to travel down to Carbondale to attend the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship, and soon became a member. Randy served as a member of the Carbondale congregation's "Building Leadership Team," and after the new building was completed in 2004, he began to consider how much more convenient it might be to have a UU congregation closer to his home.

In November, 2004, Randy noticed that a church building in Mt. Vernon was for sale, and called Rev. Bill Sasso, minister in Carbondale, to explore the concept that "If I bought that church building, maybe we could start a congregation here in Mt. Vernon." Bill's initial response was along the lines of "Usually a new congregation starts with a group of people, and then, when they are ready, they find a building" but he apparently didn't close the door firmly enough. Within a month or so, Randy called back to report that he had purchased the church, and asked "Now what?"

Bill had consulted with Dr. Angela Merkert, then Congregational Services Director of the UUA's Central Midwest District, and some initial steps became clear. The Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship Board agreed to support the exploration of possibilities in Mt. Vernon, and a Mt. Vernon Committee was formed, consisting of Randy Farrar, Tom Robinson, Vennie Anderson, Glenda Eubanks, and Rev. Sasso. They met at the church building in Mt. Vernon, looked it over, and began to formulate plans.¹ The District Office ordered a demographic study of the Mt. Vernon area, and the study suggested that there were potential UUs in the vicinity. The committee planned a series of three public, informational meetings to be held the last Wednesday evening of March, April, and May, as a means of gathering those who might be interested in a UU congregation. These meetings were advertised in *The Mt. Vernon Register-News* and The Centralia Morning Sentinel, and notices were placed in The Southern Illinoisan. Notices were also underwritten on the local National Public Radio network. Each of the meetings attracted an attendance of about twenty-five to thirty people, and many of these people formed the initial core of the congregation. At the first two evening meetings, Rev. Sasso and others from Carbondale spoke about different aspects of Unitarian Universalism. At the meeting at the end of May, Dr. Angela Merkert spoke and led a conversation about forming a UU congregation.

To maintain the momentum from these meetings, Vennie Anderson of Carbondale led a six-session "Building Your Own Theology" program over the summer, traveling up to Mt. Vernon

¹ In one of the ironies of this story, after meeting at the church, Randy suggested that they adjourn to the Mt. Vernon Elks Club, where he was a member, for lunch. The site of the Elks Club is the former site of the Mt. Vernon Universalist Church, which existed from approximately 1880 to 1925. The former church building was sold by the Illinois Universalist Convention in 1944. At the time of the lunch, however, no one present knew about this geographical coincidence.

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weekly. At the end of the summer, the de facto leaders of the congregation made two significant decisions: (1) that they wanted to begin holding Sunday morning services each week; and (2) that they wished to engage in a social service project. In September, 2005, the congregation began to hold regular Sunday morning services at 10 a.m. That same month, the congregation's participation (now annual) in the "Backpack Service Project" began. Also at this time, the leaders of the congregation began working to figure out "institutional stuff" like creation and adoption of Bylaws, incorporation, and so on.

In October, a group from Business and Professional Women of Mt. Vernon visited one Sunday. Glenda Eubanks had been elected to the Board of BPW, and the President, Nina Peacock, did not belong to a religious community. When she was informed that it was a tradition for women from the group to attend a religious service with their President, Nina declared that she's like to come to church with Glenda, resulting in an unexpected influx of professional women one Sunday morning. This prompted Randy Farrar to ask Glenda how many other organizations she belonged to, in the hope of using this strategy to increase attendance as frequently as possible.

October also saw the beginning of changes to the church itself. Randy, as owner, began to explore the possibility of selling the pews and using the proceeds to purchase comfortable, attractive chairs that could be set up in different arrangements. One Sunday, Randy brought in samples of different shingles, inviting the congregation's ideas about which would look best when the church roof was re-done. Later that month, the congregation hosted a "Halloween" event, intended mainly for the children of the neighborhood. This event took place for several years.

On January 1, 2006, the congregation began its annual tradition of holding a New Year's Day Potluck gathering. Also around this time, the Wednesday evening "Open Minds" discussions began, featuring a series on the work of Joseph Campbell.

In the Spring of 2006, the first congregational meeting was held. Those elected as leaders included Randy Farrar, Shannon Green, and Glenda Eubanks as Co-Chairs of the Board of Trustees, Kelly Taylor as secretary, and Paul Kent Oakley as Treasurer). At this meeting, the congregation's "charter members" signed its membership book.

The purchase of chairs was on the agenda of our first board meeting (First Wednesday of June 2006) after legal organization and election of our first board in May 2006. Randy proposed to buy the chairs by reimbursing the fellowship with his own money for the cost of their purchase; he made no reference to the money from the pews. The chairs were ordered and paid for by the congregation

Soon afterward, however, the fledgling Fellowship faced a tragedy. Just after the 4th of July weekend, Randy Farrar was found murdered in his home. As Randy was, more than anyone else, the founder of the congregation, this was a terrible shock. The fact that he owned the church building, and was so supportive of the congregation in so many ways, amplified the loss further.

Randy's death was the first real crisis the Fellowship had faced, and the members rallied to face it together. Without Randy, could the Fellowship sustain itself? Those present determined to

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carry the congregation and its ministry forward, as this was the best way they knew to honor Randy's life.

On Sunday, July 16, 2006, the congregation held its first memorial service, which was attended by members of Randy's family and the community as well as members of the Fellowship itself. The service was organized by Shannon Green and Paul Kent Oakley, and Adam Stone presented the eulogy. Later, a family memorial service was held in Springfield, Illinois (the home of Randy's brother) and still later, a third service was held by the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship. Randy's family, appreciating the significance of the Mt. Vernon UU Fellowship in his life, graciously continued the use of the building by the congregation, and eventually Randy's mother donated it to the Fellowship in his memory.² One year after his death, in a special Sunday service, the Fellowship dedicated a plaque in Randy's memory at the back of the main hall.

In conjunction with the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship and the emerging UU congregation in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the Fellowship applied to the UUA's Central Midwest District for a Chalice Lighters grant. The application was successful, and in November, 2006, the congregation received \$7,340 -- of which \$1,500 came directly from the Carbondale congregation. This was matched by \$3,000 contributed by members of MVUUF to support the congregation's efforts to grow.

In 2007, Dennis Arnold, loaned several pieces of his wife's textile art to the Fellowship. These attractive additions to the ambience of the congregation include the piece in currently hanging in the center of the wall behind the chancel. About the same time, Saribenne Evesong and Paul Kent Oakley donated the keyboard, improving the possibilities for music in the congregation.

Among those who arrived at the Fellowship in 2007, was Luke Crawford, who soon began to play a role in its leadership. This was also the year that the congregation's participation in the "Angels on Assignment" (a city-wide, faith-based service organization, coordinated by First United Methodist Church in Mt. Vernon) began.

During the summer of that year, the Welcoming Congregation Process was begun with the creation of the Taskforce for Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Concerns. As a standing committee, its first task was to lead the congregation through the Welcoming Congregation process. The Taskforce led a worship service on LGBT issues planned for the process to follow.

In December, 2007, the first "Winterfaith Celebration" began. Organized primarily by Angela Czapiewski, Glenda Eubanks, Shannon Green, and Paul Kent Oakley, and partially funded for the first two Celebrations through the Chalice Lighters grant, "Winterfaith" is a celebration of winter holidays of the world's religions, with a distinct holiday recognized each Sunday in December and January. The first of the Welcoming Congregation workshops took place in

² Due to legal procedures regarding the inheritance, the actual donation of the building to the congregation took place on March 1, 2008. During the interim, the family rented the building to the fellowship after Randy's death. The donation of the building was not from the family but specifically from Randy's mother, who used her own money to purchase the building from the estate which she then donated to the fellowship.

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January, 2008, as part of the first Winterfaith Celebration. Another outgrowth of the 2007/2008 Winterfaith celebration was the beginning of the Fellowship's drum circle.

In 2008, the Fellowship faced another loss when Charles Jay died. Again, the group faced the reality that even a young congregation must be able to grieve its losses. In September of this year, a special "Blessing of the Animals" Sunday service was especially memorable.

In 2009, the Fellowship initiated some "new traditions" common to other UU congregations, including a flower communion and a water ceremony. It continued the journey to becoming recognized as a "Welcoming Congregation," educating itself in order to build a congregational commitment to honor the presence and contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning people. In September, Rev. Sasso preached and led a workshop after the service on the worship within UUism, exploring its meanings and leading the experience. But at the end of November, the second of the congregation's charter members, Saribenne Evesong, died after a long illness. Again, the Fellowship drew itself together to support the family, to grieve a dear friend, and to honor a life well-lived.

The 2009/2010 Winterfaith series led into the New Year. In the first three months of 2010, Rev. Bill Sasso, on sabbatical from his role at the Carbondale Unitarian Fellowship, led Sunday services in Mt. Vernon twice each month. During this period of time, on Valentine's Day, the UU women's vocal group "Emma's Revolution" led a spirited and appreciated Sunday service, in conjunction with their visit to Carbondale the previous evening. At the last of Rev. Sasso's series of services, on March 28, 2010, the congregation celebrated five years of 21st century Unitarian Universalism in Mt. Vernon, and looked forward to many more!

On Sunday, May 16, 2010, at the annual meeting of the membership, the congregation voted unanimously to accept the mantle of Welcoming Congregation, the culmination of the process begun nearly three years before with the formation of the standing Taskforce for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns. With this phase complete, the ongoing function of this taskforce is to educate the congregation as needed on issues of sexuality, gender, and inclusiveness, to highlight issues that may arise in the congregation so they may be resolved quickly, and to continue to lead the congregation in fulfilling the responsibilities accepted when the designation Welcoming Congregation was accepted.