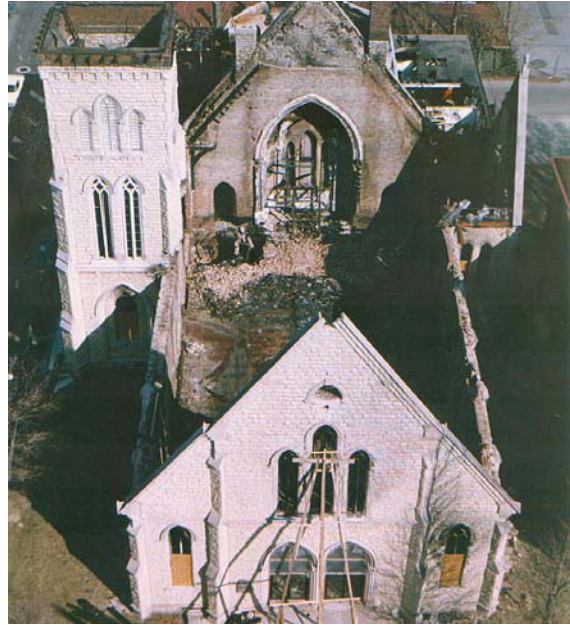


Chapter 9: Fire, Rebirth, and New Challenges, 1985-2006

Early in the morning of December 14, 1985, a spectacular fire destroyed the interior of First Unitarian Church. The roof collapsed into the sanctuary, and debris almost completely filled the basement. The fire started about 3:00 am, the first alarm was called in at 3:27, and the blaze was under control by 5:00. It was a bitter cold night, and that added to the firefighters' difficulty. One fireman was injured by some falling debris, but



most observers agreed that the disaster could have been far worse. Steve Smeltzer, the building

custodian, and his family escaped from their apartment in the Heywood House, which did not catch fire. Continuing fear that the stone walls would collapse led to the closing of York Street between Third and Fourth Streets until a supporting structure had been erected.

Eventually the outer walls of the church were deemed to be structurally sound enough so that they did not have to be pulled down. The cause of the fire was never discovered, but suspicion centered on the old boiler in the basement.

Sunday services were moved to Spalding University Center, and the Christmas Eve Vespers service was held at Calvary Episcopal Church, just down Fourth Street. Within a short time, the congregation selected a Process Committee to determine how to go about recovering from the fire and decided, with very little dissent, to rebuild at the same location and continue to fulfill its social responsibility to the downtown neighborhoods. This committee contacted other churches that



had suffered similar calamities to learn of their experiences. In late April, the congregation elected a Building Committee, chaired by Claudia Runge, and one of that committee's first actions was to bring in Dr. Edwin C. Lynn, an architect and a Unitarian minister from Ipswich, Massachusetts, as a consultant. At a congregational meeting on May 8, Lynn suggested various alternatives such as keeping only the streetside walls and moving the main entrance of the church from Fourth Street to the York Street side. Others at the meeting suggested incorporating Heywood House into the new church design. Lynn was particularly helpful in assisting the building committee with charting its course and identifying its priorities. During the summer, the committee interviewed and saw presentations from a number of selected architectural firms, and ultimately chose the Louisville firm of Grossman Chapman Kingsley, which had substantial experience in designing churches in the area and was very interested in trying to accommodate

the desires of the congregation. The committee spent nearly a year discussing preliminary plans and models before the congregation was asked to approved a recommended design. Then the committee spent another several months dealing with estimates from builders, finally choosing Weir Construction, a firm that proved to be very accessible and dependable Weir did work of good quality and stayed within the budget, although some painful decisions had to be made along the way. The actual construction took about nine months in 1988 and early 1989 and went smoothly, although a surveying error left an uneven second floor that necessitated a short ramp.



In the rebuilt church, the old roof was replaced by a flatter roof with clerestory windows that allowed much more light into the sanctuary, as the photo above shows. The orientation of the sanctuary was shifted to the west (Fourth Street) end because of the decision to place a folding wall to separate the sanctuary from the social hall, yet allow for the two spaces to be

made into one large space, for the sake of flexibility. The church was linked to Heywood House by a library that was constructed in the space between the two, and a second floor at the east end of the church, also linked with the second floor of Heywood House, provided Sunday School rooms, a DRE Office, and a choir practice room. Church administrative offices were located in what had been the rear of the first floor of Heywood House, and a new main entrance was situated at the southeast corner of the building, with access from Library Lane, an existing alley that runs between Third and Fourth Streets.



The rebuilding was paid for with about \$2 million from insurance on the old building and another \$400,000 from a capital funds pledge drive. Financing was made more complicated by the collapse of the bond market in 1987, which cost the church about \$225,000. The capital

funds drive, however, was successful and included \$178,000 from the Mary and Barry Bingham, Sr. Foundation, which paid for the outdoor courtyard behind the church, and a substantial donation from the Grosscurth family, which paid for the church lighting, and another donation from Armin Willig for the construction of a new minimalist steel steeple to replace the traditional one that had not survived the fire. At the end, the money left over was sufficient to purchase a Ewing Fahey sculpture for the courtyard and to pay for stained glass window designs by Julia Wyrick. Various members of the congregation donated additional money for the fabrication of these windows by Peter Eichhorn for the sanctuary, where they remain as memorial windows.

In the wake of the fire, the congregation had called Richard Beal as its new permanent minister, beginning in September 1986. Beal, a graduate of Goddard College and Harvard Divinity School, had been minister of two small congregations in Maine, was not too interested in Louisville at first because he saw no room for change and innovation at the church. But the fire changed that situation, and Beal saw the rebuilding process as an attractive challenge. He worked closely with the board and building committee in the rebuilding process.



Interested in race relations, Beal recommended to the board that it arrange for First Unitarian to lease the Plymouth Congregational Church at 41st and Herman Streets in Louisville's heavily African American west side. The lease, which ran from April 1987 to April 1989 cost \$10,000, plus \$1,000 for minor maintenance. The move to the west end

did not please everyone in the church, and a few members never attended services there. Most, however, approved of the move and pitched in to clean, patch, and paint the Plymouth Church, which was not in very good condition. The two congregations occasionally had joint services and shared a viewing of the documentary history of the civil rights movement, *Eyes on the Prize*.

The first service in the new church was held Easter Sunday 1989, with a formal dedication service conducted on September 24. Two institutional changes brought about by the fire were the creation of an Endowment Committee, with income from endowments to be used for maintenance and small capital purchases and an Art and Architecture Committee to decide on suitable aesthetic amenities for the church and grounds. The board of trustees also voted to host the 1990 Fall District Conference at the church in order to show it off to a wider Unitarian community and to signify the congregation's recovery from the fire. Whether or not the fire wrought fundamental changes in the congregation is a question that many have asked, but given the fact that a new minister arrived less than a year after the fire, it is a difficult question to answer. What is clear is that the fire and its immediate aftermath brought the members of the congregation closer together, brought some lapsed members back to the church, and attracted some highly committed new members.



Richard Beal led the church through the 1990s, years of relative calm after the turmoil of the sanctuary issue, fire, and rebuilding of the preceding decade. In 1990, DRE Anne Miller retired after more than 25 years of service to the youth of the church and was replaced by Abby Henry (1990-1992) and Kim Johnson (1992-1995), both young educators in transitional states of their careers. They were succeeded by Cathy Leary, a seminary student

who finished her studies in 1997 and was ordained a Unitarian minister in 1998. The board then appointed her associate minister and DRE, a position she held until 2000. In late 1993, the board terminated music director Terry Borne's employment after irreconcilable problems developed over such issues as practice time in the church and his reputed insensitivity toward visitors to the church and church members. He was replaced by a succession of music directors and instrumentalists, including Frank Richmond, Jim Oxyer, Cheryl Black, Tim Glasscock, Michael Megahan, Marian Ziebell, Rebecca Johnson, and Will Plummer..

Beal was also instrumental in the advancement of the Partner Church program and First Unitarian's own involvement in it. The program, which brings together a North American congregation with one in the Transylvania region of Romania, is an attempt to link American Unitarianism with its sixteenth-century roots, as well as a means of providing financial support to small, impoverished congregations in a relatively poor European nation. Beal used part of a sabbatical leave in the spring of 1992 to visit First Unitarian's partner church in Nagyenyed, Romania, and later in the 1990s, led two groups of members on tours to Nagyenyed and the surrounding area. He also helped found and served as president of the Partner Church Council for two years, through which he did much to promote the program within the denomination.

Closer to home, Beal initiated more traditional summer services to place the church on a year-around schedule and continued the involvement of the church in social action programs, although with less of a public face than his predecessors. A pagan group, CUUPS, formed and integrated into the life of the church with little controversy, as did a number of gay, lesbian, and transgendered members and friends who formed a group known as Interweave that was important in the church's becoming a "Welcoming Congregation" in 1996. In the community, Beal and members of the church were active in the Fairness Campaign to convince the city

government to pass an ordinance forbidding discrimination against gays and lesbians, and Beal conducted many gay and lesbian weddings in the church. Beal was also involved with the HELP Office and the Interdenominational Ministers' Coalition, in which he was one of only two white ministers. Although the move to the west end did not yield any lasting results in making the church more racially diverse, Beal organized the first local Kwanzaa celebration in a predominantly white church, served on the NAACP board, helped lead a study of the state of desegregation in Louisville, and staged a public protest in front of the all-white Pendennis Club in downtown Louisville. Members of the church, spearheaded by Janet Rink, also did volunteer work at Tingley House, a haven for impoverished single mothers and their children, Habitat for Humanity, and the Center for Women and Families.

Yet there remained the problem of a flat membership that no locally-devised strategy or denominational program, such as Decisions for Growth, was able to alleviate. As the decade wore on, financial strains became more severe, with a number of disappointing canvass results. Innovative fund-raising projects helped relieve the squeeze somewhat. Beal suggested holding an annual holiday Food Fair, a descendant of the old bazaars organized by the Women's Alliance nearly a century earlier, as a major fund-raising event, and this continued for several years. Members made a wide variety of holiday foods and crafts and sold them to the public on a Saturday in December, bringing in several thousand dollars each year. But it was very labor-intensive and by the end of the decade, became too much for willing members to take on. The Service Auction, a tradition that had begun with merchandise auctions in the 1970s, earned increasing amounts of money in the 1990s with the leadership of the Miller and Taylor families. But it was hard to conceal the fact that while the proceeds from these extra fund-raising efforts

had originally been used for special purchases, they were now a vital part of the general church budget.

Changing times brought changes to the church structure. The Layman's League and the Evening Alliance had long been gone, but the Women's Alliance struggled on with an increasingly elderly membership of only 18 or 20 in the early 1990s. Mary Gilbert and Emilie Louise Clinkenbeard were effectively president and treasurer for life, and they were both nearly 90 when, in 1995, they officially disbanded the Women's Alliance, one year short of the centennial of its founding. As the Women's Alliance declined, a more informal group of mostly younger women, affiliated with the UUWF (Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation) met at church, held annual retreats at Hopscotch House, a women's center in eastern Jefferson County, and did some significant community building within the congregation. These women continue to meet and in 2005 resurrected the Women's Alliance name. Youth and young adult groups, such as the Parker Club and the Channing Club, no longer existed, nor did the Couples' Club. A group of mostly retired members, the Brownbaggers, did meet once a month for lunch and a program, and a small group of retired men, ROMEOS (Retired Old Men Eating Out), did just that one day a month. High school and junior high school youth bonded with periodic events, such as sleepovers, cooking an Easter pancake breakfast for the congregation, and, for a time, operating a haunted house in the church basement at Halloween. But the extensive structure of specialized social organizations had, by the end of the 1990s, fallen victim to the increasingly hectic pace of American life.

The church year of 2000-2001 saw the resignation of Associate Minister Cathy Leary and the retirement of long-time office manager Marge Warden, both key figures in the administration of the church. Leary was succeeded by the capable Lisa Willner, a church member, but



replacing Warden proved to be a daunting task, with several individuals occupying her post during the succeeding years.

In 2001, a new position, Shared Ministry Coordinator, was created. The coordinator's job is to find church members willing to volunteer at the church and to help other members of the church staff as needed. Laura Jennings was the first to

hold this half-time position, but she left in 2002 to pursue graduate studies at the University of Illinois. She was succeeded by Barbara Kearley (2002-2004) and Linda Givens, the present coordinator.

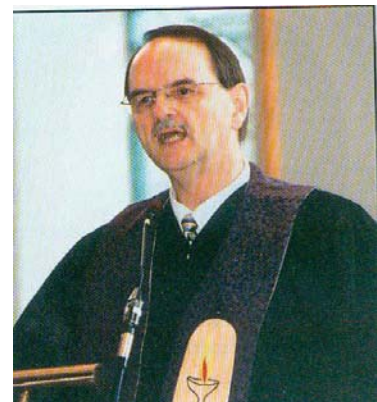
If the congregation at the beginning of the twentieth century was composed of all-white, upper middle class, socially conservative Christian families who lived within a two-mile radius from the church, the congregation a century later was radically different in almost every way. While the church directory lists a slightly higher number of members and friends, including children than the 1902 parish register, far fewer are economically well-to-do or Christian Unitarians. There is greater racial and ethnic diversity, and our number now includes a significant percentage of gays and lesbians. More than 20 percent live in southern Indiana, and relatively few live within a two-mile radius of the church. Rather than officers in businesses or manufacturing concerns, our members now tend to be students, teachers, social workers, or retired.

In the spring of 2001, Richard Beal announced his resignation after 15 years in the pulpit. According to Beal, his resignation was prompted by a sense that he had been at First Unitarian long enough and that neither he nor the church was growing. An interim minister, David Parke, was hired for the 2001-2002 church year while a search for a permanent minister proceeded.

The church was saddened during the 2001-02 church year by the death of Jackey Dorsett, the church's building supervisor. After many years of treatment and several hospitalizations, Jackey lost her battle with severe depression and ended her life by suicide in April 2002.

The work of the 2001-2002 Search Committee, chaired by Claudia Runge, led to the calling of Norbert (Norm) Stewart as the church's new minister. He came from a church in Vancouver, British Columbia, and was hired in part for his administrative and financial background.

In the final year of Beal's ministry, a new and highly controversial issue arose that has continued to dominate congregational discussion to the time of this writing. This is polyamory, whose adherents believe that it is possible for a person to have loving, committed, and intimate relationships with more



than one other individual. Part of a national group called Unitarians United for Polyamory Awareness (UUPA), First Unitarian's polyamorists asked for recognition as a special interest group of the church, with the privilege of advertising their meetings and events from the pulpit and in the church newsletter, *Steepletalk*. Some members of the congregation strongly supported this group's aspirations to become an official part of the church community, while others fiercely opposed granting polyamory that status, citing their opinion of its questionable morality and the damage that its identification with the church would do to the church's image in the community. Although a compromise was reached that allowed the group to meet at the church but not publicize its activities in written or electronic church publications, the issue was as divisive as any the church had known for years, causing some families to leave the church and others to

reduce their financial commitment to the church. This served only to worsen the deteriorating financial condition of the church.

The continuing financial problems and other divisive issues contributed to Norm Stewart's resignation as minister in June 2006. An interim minister, Elizabeth Scheuerman, will occupy the pulpit in the 2006-2007 church year.

As the church embarked on the many activities of its 175th anniversary program, however, some of the more challenging issues seemed to recede into the shadows, and a new sense of commitment and enthusiasm arose. An all-church picnic in July 2005, a family dance in October, a special ceremony commemorating the occasion when Susan B. Anthony spoke at the church, the revival of the holiday food fair (renamed Yuletide Fare), and the collaborative making of an anniversary quilt were some of the events that served to create a more positive attitude among many members and friends and to inspire them to look more hopefully toward the next 175 years.