

THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN
NEEDHAM, UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST

INTO THE NEW CENTURY

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The year 2001 was a time of great trauma for the country due to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. First Parish, however, was fortunate to acquire as its new pastor one of the leading figures of our Unitarian Universalist Association, the Reverend John Buehrens. The immediate Past President of the Association, he had also served churches in Knoxville, Tennessee; Dallas, Texas; and New York City. Already the author of *A CHOSEN FAITH*, written with Forrest Church, he wrote two more books since coming to us: *UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE*, An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals, and, with Rebecca Parker, *A HOUSE OF HOPE*, the Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century. In chapters of the latter book which John wrote, he frequently cites experiences which he has had since coming to the Needham church. Near the end of his time with us, John is working on another book, *UNIVERSALISTS AND UNITARIANS IN AMERICA*, timed to be published in 2011 for the 50th anniversary of the merger of the two bodies in 1961.

John's eloquence as a speaker, leadership skills, and pastoral gifts have drawn a succession of new members to our church. In addition, he created the Needham Lyceum, and was active in the Needham Clergy Association and Habitat for Humanity. It was through his teaching at Harvard Divinity School that he was able to secure outstanding students to become interns in our church. These included Thom Belote, Sarah Gibb, Maria Cristina Vassidis, Lucas Hergert and Molly Housh. A Major concern of John's was the war in Iraq and he journeyed there with the National Council of Churches before it began.

John had the courage and foresight to guide us toward a capital campaign to enlarge our facilities to meet the needs of our growing membership and church school. A large bequest from Elizabeth Bradford Storer, a long time member of First Parish, enabled the beginning of our effort. In 2006 the

Parish voted to approve the recommendations of the Capital Campaign Committee to raise one million dollars for the renovation of Parish Hall, the office wing and the church school. As the design developed the goal was increased to two million dollars toward a three million dollar project. A tentative idea to create a second story over the old Parish Hall was dropped in favor of creating an entirely new structure. This proved to be a very wise move as severe structural problems were encountered in the foundation of the 1888 building as demolition progressed. Frank Olney of Johnson Olney Associates, Inc. was chosen as architect.

The religious community supported us during our fifteen month period of renovation. Thanks to the gracious hospitality of Temple Beth Shalom and Rabbi Jay Perlman, we were able to have most of our Sunday morning services at the temple. Other churches opening their doors to us were: the Carter Memorial Methodist Church, Needham for Sunday School and the Homegrown Coffee House; The First Baptist Church, Needham; the First Parish, Dedham, and the First Unitarian Society in Newton. A series of social gatherings and meals in various restaurants, called "Fun and Frolic," kept alive connections among First Parish members.

We returned to our enlarged facilities in September of 2009. A Rededication Ceremony was held on November 2, 2009 with UUA President William Sinkford as the featured speaker. The annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service was held at First Parish and was followed by a tour of the new facility.

Membership and attendance at church services has continued to increase. Membership reached two hundred and sixty-eight as of May 2010, a 33% increase in ten years. The church school numbers have remained high. Our Religious Education Director, Irene Praeger, received her M. Ed. degree in Religious Education and has been credentialed as a professional religious educator by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The youth group increased from thirteen members in 2001 to a projection of forty in the fall of 2010. This group participated in service projects in Louisiana, Tennessee, and in Dorchester and Holyoke, Massachusetts. Young parents in the church created Parenting Your Children

offering monthly social and educational programs.

Sue King became our Church Administrator in 1999 and retired in 2010. She was part of a team that developed programs to certify members of the Association of Unitarian Universalist Administrators, became its Vice President, and has presented workshops at several General Assemblies.

The Music program has grown under the continued direction of our music director Vivian Montgomery, who received her Ph.D. in Musical Arts in Early Music and Historical Performance Practice from Case Western Reserve University in 2007. The Choir has increased in numbers and enlarged its repertoire supported by guest artists. An 1884 Hook & Hastings organ was purchased in 2005. In May 2010 the church undertook the production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Ruddigore" with a cast and crew of approximately eighty people ranging in age from five to seventy-nine.

Our Homegrown Coffeehouse celebrated its 25th year in 2007. It presents major folk and jazz performances and is widely recognized as one of the top venues in New England, with a national reputation for excellence.

The Memorial Garden, a gift from the family of Virginia Strong, is a project that was begun in 2008, with a total regrading of the land between the sanctuary and the office extension. The result is a beautiful landscaped garden, enhanced by granite blocks from the old foundation that form modern sculptures. Ashes may be scattered there and people may have the names of loved ones inscribed on the window overlooking the garden.

A five year Strategic Plan was adopted in 2009. One outcome was the Program Council which would coordinate parish events. The plan included an updating of the bylaws which was achieved and accepted by the membership. A congregational survey and a financial projection from 2009 to 2015 were also undertaken.

Several committees have been formed including Membership and the Small Group Ministry.

The latter provides an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth in a setting that is more intimate than Sunday services. There were eight to ten groups meeting bi-monthly. The Adult Education Committee has been revitalized and offers courses, speakers and discussions on topics that promote spiritual development and religious learning. One example is a church wide discussion of “The Post American World” by Fareed Zakeria.

The Social Action Committee serves as an umbrella for all the service projects that the church undertakes. The congregation donates one offering a month to support one of these projects. An Environmental Committee challenged church members to reduce the use of energy by 10%. This committee, now separate from Social Action, is called The Green Congregation. In May of 2010 First Parish in Needham became the first house of worship in Massachusetts to receive an Energy Star certification from the U.S Environmental Protection Agency.

During the renovation of our building the Archives Committee met at the Needham Historical Society and, in conjunction with the Society, featured an eight month exhibit entitled “When Church and Town Were One, 1711--1834.” This committee will be involved with the church's participation in the Town of Needham's 300th Anniversary Celebration.

A Multigenerational Task Force was charged with researching types of programming that would promote interaction between adults and children in the parish. An additional Task Force was appointed to suggest activities for First Parish's 300th Anniversary Celebration. There will be lectures, a concert, a tour of our building, historical displays, and a float in the Fourth of July parade. The 300th Anniversary Celebration will begin in the fall of 2010 and will conclude with the Tercentennial Address by the minister on November 13, 2011.

R.E. Director Irene Praeger reported that there had been requests for an extension of Ruth Sutro's "A Brief History of First Parish," written in 2005 at the beginning of the Capital Campaign. Shirley Pratt volunteered to gather the material for such an extension and other members of the Archives Committee, namely, Jeanette Anderson, chair, Buffy Duhig and Ruth Sutro worked together with her to create this update entitled "The First Parish Church in Needham, Unitarian Universalist into the New Century 2001 – 2010."