

Our History, Our Growing Legacy

History of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge

Beginnings and Early Development

The foundation for the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge was laid by a small group of individuals who, in the late 1940s sought to establish a liberal religious community in Baton Rouge. Fortuitously, the Reverend Albert D'Orlando, who shortly after becoming minister of First Unitarian Church in New Orleans in 1950, was holding monthly meetings with students at Louisiana State University to talk about Unitarianism. The group attended the informational meetings, and were convinced that they had found the liberal religion they were seeking.

In the fall of 1951, sixteen would-be Unitarians held their first official meeting in a room at the Heidelberg Hotel (later named the Capitol House); five of the group signed the charter establishing the Unitarian Fellowship of Baton Rouge, including Tillie Ventre Dawson, Redrick Fogle, Ruth Fogle, Fred Tuttle, and Ida Lee Tuttle. All played critical roles in the early development of the Fellowship. The Rev. D'Orlando was present at the meeting, as was Reverend Monroe Husbands of the American Unitarian Association.



The Unitarian Fellowship of Baton Rouge was admitted into the American Unitarian Association in February 1952. The Reverend D'Orlando would serve as the Fellowship's mentor and guide and provide part-time ministerial services for seven years of their formative development. He maintained his connection to the end of his ministry and is a treasured figure in the history of the church. In grateful recognition for his place in the church's history, a tree was later planted in his honor, and, in fitting symbolism, the

D'Orlando Oak has grown to a stately and majestic height along with the church he helped to establish.

The first meetings of the Fellowship were held in the basement of the Old State Capitol. The group's ouster because of protests from individuals who objected to the group's "outlandish religion" proved to portend the difficulties the group would face in finding and keeping places to meet. Within the first few years, meetings were held in three different locations. One program chairman during these unsettled years remembered that his hardest job was not finding speakers or planning programs, but rather, the difficulty was finding members to inform them where the next meeting would be held.

It was apparent that the group needed a place of its own in which to meet. Through a variety of money-raising activities, sufficient funds were accumulated, and a house and lot were purchased and became the Fellowship's first home. To their good fortune, the property stood in the path of the projected interstate artery; its sale to the city "for the stately sum of \$10,000" provided the funds to begin a search for land on which to build a permanent home. While searching for property and planning and designing a permanent building, meetings and religious education classes were held in numerous locations, including house that was deemed "bearable only because it was temporary."

A few years later, the purchase of the house that served as the Fellowship's last temporary meeting place had an added advantage: it stood at a major dead-end intersection that proved to be ideal for their iconic "Wayside Pulpit," which displayed liberal messages that got the attention of passing drivers, if not new members. This house, nostalgically remembered as "5803 Government," would be the last of eight stops of those nomadic Unitarian pilgrims on their long but determined journey. Significantly, the 1961 merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association took place ten years after the Fellowship's founding and as Unitarianism was slowly taking hold in a

Deep South city that had not been welcoming to this “strange new radical religion.”



Groundbreaking on Goodwood Blvd.

The long-held dream of finding land on which to build their permanent home was realized with the launch of a search in 1964 that resulted in the purchase of three acres of land and erection of the Fellowship's first sanctuary. The now-settled Unitarian Fellowship of Baton Rouge was dedicated on its present site in 1965. Among those honored at the dedication were The Reverend Albert D'Orlando and the Reverend Anita Truman Pickett, a retired Unitarian minister, who also figures significantly in the church's early history. The dedication marked a new era for the Fellowship and the beginning of Unitarian Universalism and religious liberalism as firmly established forces in the Baton Rouge religious community.

A New Era Begins

Buoyed by a new confidence and a clear vision of its future, the Fellowship continued to grow and become financially secure, and by 1966, the membership reached the level required for the Minister-at-Large program. In 1967, the members voted to apply to the program with the goal of increasing membership and securing a financial base that could support a full-time minister. Assisted by The Reverend Russell Lockwood, Southwest Regional Unitarian Universalist

Coordinator, the Reverend Arthur Olsen arrived in January 1969 to serve as Minister-at-Large for twelve months. By the end of his tenure, the membership reached 118, and with a comfortable level of pledges, the Fellowship voted to launch a search for its first minister.



The Reverend Edgar T. "Toby" Van Buren became the Fellowship's first minister in November 1969, becoming the first of three ministers during whose tenures important strides would be made in furthering a Unitarian Universalist presence in Baton Rouge. Reverend Van Buren's six-year ministry was marked by an increase in the Fellowship's finances and membership and an expansion of programs. Religious

Education became firmly established with hiring of the first part-time Religious Education Director; enrollment in the religious education program increased, and membership and activities of the Liberal Religious Youth group was bolstered by teens who came of age during this period. Many societal changes were taking place including the political and social unrest of the concurrent Vietnam War, all of which animated and engaged the Fellowship in social justice activism during Reverend Van Buren's tenure, which ended in 1975.

The Reverend Glenn Turner became the Fellowship's second minister in August 1976. A number of significant strides were made in the course of his tenure, notably, a change in status from Fellowship to Church - a change that signified the growth of a strong Unitarian Universalist congregation in Baton Rouge. Through more intentional emphasis on stewardship, substantial financial support of the church increased through pledged giving, which gave confidence in initiation of plans for the enlargement of existing facilities, including a larger sanctuary. The period was also characterized by more formal worship services and a varied music program, bolstered by volunteer

professional musicians in the membership. A more effective organizational structure evolved through revision of the Church's bylaws, making governance more efficient. More programs were developed that engaged both church members and members of the community, resulting from the church's increased visibility both locally and regionally. The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge was well on the way to becoming a forceful presence in the Southwest Unitarian Universalist Conference by the end of Reverend Turner's tenure in January 1982.

New Vision and Growth



The Reverend Steve J. Crump became the church's third minister in January 1983, beginning what would be a thirty-six-year tenure. Now mature and confident of its mission, the church was poised to embrace the vision he brought to his ministry, and entered a new and vibrant era of liberal religion in the Baton Rouge community. The Church experienced an increase in membership, a stronger religious education program for children and youth with staffed leadership; and a staff-positioned music director, which made possible development of a well-trained choir and addition of varied music ensembles. Sunday worship services, in which the choir was a prominent feature, became more liturgical in format. The increasing membership and emphasis on stewardship helped insure a strong financial base. The push for expansion of facilities that had begun years earlier came into closer focus with retirement of the original mortgage in 1985. Successive capital campaigns resulted in significant expansion of physical facilities: a large sanctuary in 1988, additions to the Religious Education Wing and larger office spaces in 1998, and substantial renovation of the sanctuary in 2018. The latter resulted from the first-ever campaign to raise 1.5 million dollars, launched in 2012 as the Great Expectation Capital Growth Campaign, which provided funds for a major

renovation to the parking lot, the Peace Garden, and additions to the ministerial and other staff positions. Members became more involved in outreach and social justice which resulted in higher visibility for the church in the community.

Early in his ministry Reverend Crump became prominently involved in organizing the city's first interfaith organization, initially called the Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues, but later renamed The Interfaith Federation of Greater Baton Rouge as membership broadened to include other faith traditions. Reverend Crump and members of our church were involved in various programs of the Federations from the beginning, and in later years a member became the first Unitarian to serve on the Board of Directors and subsequently as president of the Federation.

Due to his initiatives, leadership, and personal involvements, a closer identification with the larger Unitarian Universalist movement developed with members involved on the regional and national levels. His leadership and respect among churches in the state and region resulted in recognition of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge as a flagship congregation in the Southern Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The continuing growth in membership and expansion of programs resulted in the need for additional ministerial staff. An associate minister was called in 1997 but served for what would be a short tenure that ended in 1998, resulting in Reverend Crump fulfilling all the ministerial needs as Senior Minister in the intervening years. In August 2012 an assistant minister was added to help serve the expanding programs and ministerial and pastoral duties, including a second Sunday service that had been added in 2002.

During his tenure the church grew from a pastoral-sized church of about 200 members to memberships that fluctuated between 425 to 480 members. The increased membership and emphasis on stewardship, along with his skillful administrative leadership and steadfast stewardship of finances, financial stability was insured, and

the annual budget increased to close to one million dollars during his tenure. The growth, stability, and visibility in the city that the church now enjoys can be credited both to Reverend Crump's leadership, and his long and successful tenure. In appreciation for his meritorious ministry, the congregation bestowed on him the title of Minister Emeritus on the occasion of his retirement from active ministry in January 2019.

The Reverend Amy J. Samonds' tenure as Associate Minister began in September 1997 and coincided with greatly expanding programs. In addition to sharing the pulpit in Sunday worship services, she taught classes in Religious Education and Adult programs, and helped with developing the Young Adult Ministry. She was also active in expanding pastoral and congregational care. Reverend Samonds' one-year ministry with the church ended in September 1998.



The Reverend Nathan A. Ryan began his tenure as assistant minister in August 2012, and made history as the first minister to be ordained by the church. His duties in shared ministry include leading or co-leading Sunday worship; leadership of the small ministry program known as Branches; leadership with youth in the Religious Education program; and pastoral care. The church's first minister to have grown up in

Unitarian Universalism, Reverend Ryan introduced the traditionally Christian Holy Thursday Tenebrae service. He is involved in social justice activities within the church and larger community, and is a frequent speaker at social justice rallies. He became Associate Minister in 2016 and brings youthful energy to his ministry.

The roster of ministers who would become part of the church's history expanded with interim ministers who would serve during the period of transition following the retirement of Reverend Steve Crump's long-time ministry:

The Reverend Beth Miller began her service as "the interim between the interim" in January 2019. In her brief stay she endeared herself to members with inspiring worship services and her efficient management of other ministerial and pastoral duties. She connected with the community through attendance and participation in interfaith and social justice events during her tenure that ended in July 2019.

The Reverend Joel Miller assumed his year-long position as Interim Senior Minister on August 1, 2019. Along with leading and co-leading Sunday worship services, he served as chief administrator over the church's finances and annual pledge drive, supervised staff, and initiated changes in operations as needed. He worked closely with the Board of Directors in maintaining stability through the period of transition, and provided leadership in organizing the search for the next senior minister. He was actively involved with social justice activities, notably the community action group, Together Baton Rouge. The latter part of his tenure coincided with the historic coronavirus pandemic, which required his leadership in making major adjustments in all areas of church life, including utilizing technology and social media for Sunday worship services, meetings, and maintaining connections within the church community.

"... To Make This a Better World"

Involvement in causes related to contemporary social issues, and specifically those related to social justice and human rights, is a hallmark of the church's membership and dates to its earliest beginnings. In the 1950s, Baton Rouge Unitarians marched in the picket lines at the State Capitol to keep public schools open, while in the 1960s, members joined Freedom Marches and several joined the Peace Corps. The school desegregation strife of the 1970s and 1980s engaged the active involvement of many members, as has voter registration, capital punishment, open-housing, environmental control, women's rights, abortion rights, gun-control, gay and lesbian rights, and all issues related to human rights and human dignity. In

the 1990s, individuals and groups were involved in activities related to the alleviation of racism, illiteracy, teenage pregnancy, and other issues. The tragic killing in 1992 of a Japanese exchange student and the ensuing push for gun-control legislation spearheaded by his Unitarian host family and supported by many members of the congregation, and Reverend Crump's visit to the student's hometown of Nagoya, Japan, resulted in worldwide exposure for the church. Nagoya's gift of two large stones to the city of Baton Rouge as a token of peace found sanctuary on the church campus. Originally dedicated in 1996, the Peace Stones were rededicated in 2017 and anchor the Peace Garden, a place for meditation for church members and members of the community. The Peace Stones hi symbolize the Church's ongoing quest for peace and justice for all peoples.

A Legacy of Lay Leadership

Strong lay leadership and the involvement and participation of the membership at all levels of church life has been a major factor in the growth and vitality of the church. The Unitarian tradition of congregational governance was set into motion in the election of the Fellowship's first president in early 1952 within months of its chartering. A roster of strong presidents has followed, with many administrations providing leadership in signally important chapters in the church's evolving history, whether in building the first sanctuary, guiding the processes related to the decision to call the first minister, effecting the transition from fellowship to church, retiring the first mortgage, launching the first capital drive, building a new and larger sanctuary, in the later expansion of the Religious education wing, and in times of crisis. Leadership from the ranks of newer members has provided fresh insights and new experiences, while the ongoing involvement of long-time members has provided stability and continuity through periods of change.

Change as A Century Ends

The last decade of the twentieth century marked a period of change in several areas as a reflection of both increased membership, and greater involvement of members. To better meet the needs of a mature and growing church, a transition was made in 1993 in governance to an administrative board with responsibility of programming by chairs of Councils. A year later, planning began for a Capital Fund Drive for expansion of the Religious Education wing, resulting in more space for the increased number of children and youth in the religious education program. As programming increased, a second minister became a pressing need. In 1996 a search was launched for an Associate minister, who joined the ministerial staff in 1997. Additionally, the positions of Director of Religious Education and Director of Music were elevated to full-time status in 1999. An increased membership signaled a need for members to better connect with each other.

Although initially envisioned as a way to integrate new members into the life of the church, the 1999 launching of small group ministry and its opening to all members may be seen as one of the church's most significant developments. These major developments can be seen as some of the crowning achievements of a thriving religious community as a decade and century ended, and as the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge prepared to meet the challenges of the new century.

Moving into the Future in the 21st Century

In every decade of the long history of the church, one major development stands out for its impact, whether calling the first minister, a change of status from fellowship to church, or building a new and larger sanctuary. As the new decade and new century began, that development was a new focus on adult programming with the appointment in 2002 of a Volunteer Program Director as a staff position. While enrichment classes and activities date back to the small membership of the early Fellowship days, programming as a significant component of church life was evidenced in the large

number of classes and activities available for members and friends of the church, based on criteria set for programming in 2002.

Offerings spanned a range of continuing classes and activities, with the introduction of occasional new offerings taught by members or the minister. Systematic internal training in workshops led by Council members insured that criteria and goals of class offerings were met. A related development was attendance at district leadership training sessions by members of the board. In addition to internal programming, outstanding outside speakers included appearances by Biblical scholars.

In a tradition of outreach to the community, the church's facilities are available to community programs. Several organizations in which the church has membership also occasionally use facilities, notably the Interfaith Federation of Greater Baton Rouge, and Together Baton Rouge, a community organizing group in which members of the church figured in organizing and in which a large number of member hold membership and participate in activities. The breadth and depth of program offerings, organized volunteer service to community agencies through Outreach, and involvements in community organizations add immeasurably to the enrichment of members and to the general vitality of the church.

A major development of the new century that affected the church with dramatic intensity was the 2005 natural disaster known as Hurricane Katrina. The church became a refuge for members of Unitarian churches in the affected areas. Members of the church were significantly involved in intensive volunteer efforts in recovery of Unitarian Universalist churches in New Orleans and homes of church members. A Unitarian Universalist Service Committee grant provided funds to hire two full-time staff to organize and oversee the volunteer effort. The Baton Rouge Unitarian Church was strategically positioned to offer leadership and safe haven for those affected by this historic disaster that seriously affected Unitarian churches both in New Orleans and in the Mississippi Gulf region.

A little more than a decade later a series of events would again engage large members of the church and affect Baton Rouge and surrounding communities. On July 5, 2016 an unarmed black man was killed by a Baton Rouge police officer and for the weeks that followed, church members joined in protests as the city dealt with racial tensions and unrest. On Sunday, July 17, in a tragic event related to the earlier killing, members mourned the shooting deaths near the church of 3 police officers during Sunday worship services. Joining in community efforts to address these events, members participated in civic and community discussions that addressed patterns of use of excessive force by police. As these events related to civil unrest continued to unfold, the city was struck by a natural disaster. In early August much of Baton Rouge and surrounding areas was devastated by a major flood; the homes of a number of members were flooded. As in Hurricane Katrina years earlier, members reached out to help in the recovery.

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge has evolved from a small close-knit fellowship to a cosmopolitan church. Its racially diverse membership and embrace of individuals regardless of sexual orientation or belief system is part of its strength - aptly symbolized by the circle window inspired by Edwin Markham's poem and its expression of inclusiveness. With its rich resources of a vibrant membership and strong and visionary lay and ministerial leadership, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge continues to grow as a dynamic religious community in fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of that group of visionaries who, in an unwelcoming city, prevailed against the odds to successfully lay the foundation for liberal religion in Baton Rouge.

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge proudly continues its role as a leading congregation in the Southwestern Unitarian Universalist Conference, and as an ever-evolving and dynamic spiritual home to its members in a city now receptive to its liberal and progressive openness to all who seek what it has to offer, and to its mission to "help make this a better world."

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Revised and expanded 2020

History through the 1960s provided by early Fellowship members

Melvin Dakin, Ande Dakin, and Page Acree