

# The Second Radical Reformation: The Unitarian Fellowship Movement

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Unitarianism is a product of the Radical Reformation of the 16th century. This was a period in European religious history that gave rise to many new movements, which Ernst Troeltsch sorts into three categories: “church, sect, and mystic.” The church to Europeans meant the established church (which, ironically, was true of Unitarianism in parts of Massachusetts until the mid-19th century), but is more generally used to describe a structured, institutional church with a church bureaucracy, a defined identity, and something of a “franchise” mentality that attempts to maintain some degree of uniformity and quality control over those who bear its name.

Sects, in contrast, tend to be small, free-wheeling, and innovative. If they last, they tend to evolve into churches, losing some of their initial fire and enthusiasm as they attempt to codify and preserve what they created or discovered. Liston Pope, Dean of Yale Divinity School, observed that “By its very nature, the sect-type organization is valid for one generation only.” Troeltsch’s third type refers to the individual religious person, who may or may not be attached to a community, but whose religious experience consists largely of direct encounters with the holy with no need for mediation of priest, church, or community.

Unitarianism began life as a sect, evolving over time in the United States into a rather staid New England institution. Ironically, it appears to be the only religious movement that began as a sect, evolved into a church, and then deliberately created a sect-like movement within its own organization as a form of church extension! This paper attempts to describe and evaluate that experiment in church growth and extension as something unique to our faith community.

### **Personal Encounters**

Sometime in the early 1960s, my husband and I, both students, visited the small Unitarian fellowship in Storrs, Connecticut. We were both born and raised in the Congregational church, religious and political liberals, and had been encouraged to check out the Unitarians. There was no semblance of what we would recognize as a church service in the classroom at the high school, just slides and a discussion of Pakistan. We fled back to the Storrs Congregational Church, where our oldest daughter was baptized.

Four or five years later, we moved to Clemson, South Carolina, where there was no Congregational church, but there was another small, university-based Unitarian fellowship, meeting at the YMCA with a sprinkling of children in religious education. Our natural affinity with this group in terms of liberal values was offset by my desire for a more clearly religious atmosphere, professional leadership, and a strong religious education program for our two (later three) children. It was not until 24 years later, our three daughters all baptized and confirmed as Lutherans and off to college, that we found our way back to Unitarian Universalism where we belonged. The Clemson fellowship was still lay-led, diverse, and quarrelsome, but with some 90 members and frequent visiting ministers, it was closer to what we needed, and has since called a minister.

This story illustrates the best and the worst of the fellowship movement. Without the fellowship movement, it is unlikely that the Unitarian Universalist flag would ever have been planted in these two small college communities, and we would never have encountered Unitarian Universalism despite our New England upbringing and our college experience just 90 miles from Boston. But while the fellowship style-small and close-knit communities, strongly intellectual, anti-institutional, ahistorical, anti-ritual, anticlerical-clearly met the needs of a number of intellectual religious liberals, they did not offer much of what we were looking for in a religious community. As our only direct contact with Unitarian Universalism, these two exemplars of fellowship culture and limited size sent us back in to the arms of liberal Christianity for almost 30 years. Similar accounts are offered by new members in my present congregation who are attracted by what this religious community has become, but who had been turned away by what they first encountered ten or fifteen years ago.

## **Beginnings: The Fellowship Movement as Extension**

The fellowship movement began in 1945, something of an outgrowth of the Church of the Larger Fellowship program designed to serve isolated individual Unitarians. The first fellowship to come into existence as part of the movement was in Boulder, Colorado in July 1948. The Fellowship movement owes its inception to three people: Frederick May Eliot, president of the AUA in the 1940s; and two staff members, the Rev. Lon Ray Call and Monroe Husbands. With limited services and support, a reflection of the AUA's precarious financial situation in the 1940s, most of the cost of this extension program fell on the fellowships themselves. Fellowships actually contributed significantly to both the finances and the membership of the AUA in the next few decades.

Lay-led groups were not new either to Unitarianism or to Protestant Christianity in general. House churches were common in Europe during and after the Reformation for the non-established churches, including Methodists, Quakers, Anabaptists, and others. As early as 1793, Joseph Priestley recommended forming lay-led societies in this country for the emerging Unitarian movement. A proposal in 1907 called for the creation of lay-led societies, but in a very top down, "church-in-a-box" fashion, with the intent to grow them to church size, at which point they would follow the normal pattern of building a building and calling a minister. This earlier strategy was not very successful, so this new venture gave far greater autonomy to the local group to manage its own affairs.

While Bartlett, in her enthusiasm for the novelty of the fellowship movement, may overstate her case, it was clear from the outset that the fellowship movement would create groups larger than the isolated individuals and families served by the newly-created Church of the Larger Fellowship, but that they would not be expected or pressured to grow into churches, at least not in every case. Monroe Husbands' definition of a fellowship was "a group from ten to fifty people, having no church building, no salaried leader, functioning much like a church." He was pleased to note that these expectations were wrong as these fledgling congregations rapidly built or acquired buildings and called ordained clergy or ordained their own lay ministers. This definition was not, of course, the official definition, which Bartlett cites as:

"A Unitarian Fellowship is a resident, adult group of 10 or more religious liberals who have formulated a set of bylaws (including a purpose), have 'expressed their approval or general sympathy with the purpose of' the American Unitarian Association, have sent an application to the Secretary of the Association-together with a contribution, and whose contribution has been accepted by the Board of Directors of the American Unitarian Association. So long as a Fellowship shall continue to make an annual contribution, it shall be a member of the Association and be entitled to voting privileges."

The fellowship movement as a deliberate program of church extension was a product of limited resources and declining membership. [A few fellowships actually formed in the more traditional sectarian fashion as split-offs from established churches, but most were new starts.] As Munroe Husbands observed, the fellowship movement was the only feasible form of extension for smaller communities. Churches, he said, need to be an investment, not a liability, and the AUA's limited resources only permitted them to invest in building two or three congregations a year, in urban areas, where they could be expected to grow to self-sufficiency fairly rapidly. He also noted that many of these early fellowships survived and prospered because of the cooperation of ministers from nearby churches.

The goals of the fellowship movement were perceived differently by different observers. Bartlett in particular insists that essence of fellowship is the development of lay leadership and lay spiritual understanding through preparing sermons and other efforts at religious leadership. She insists that the measure of a fellowship's success is not "growing up to be a church," but rather its ability to serve its members religious needs. For some people, small size and opportunities for lay leadership are essential to meeting those needs. For the larger AUA, however, the fellowship strategy appeared to be a creative response to the challenge of limited resources stretched thinly over enormous extension potential in a country that was growing rapidly and seeing major population shifts away from the traditional northeastern home of the movement. Even Bartlett admits that there was some expectation that fellowships would develop into churches, quoting from a 1958 extension department pamphlet:

"New churches are affiliated with the American Unitarian Association when they have met the minimum requirements: most evolve from the Fellowship program."

### **Last Days: Change in Strategy**

While the beginning of the fellowship movement is easy to chronicle, the ending, if indeed it can be said to have ended, was slow and gradual. Sometime between the retirement of Munroe Husbands in 1967 and the beginning of the Eugene Pickett administration (1979-1985), the combination of loss of staff leadership and AUA support and the availability of Veatch monies (beginning in the early 1960s) for supporting other kinds of extension changed the priorities and approaches for church growth and extension. Some new congregations still choose to call themselves fellowships, and there is still an option of organizing lay-led groups that may affiliate with the UUA when they reach critical size. Currently that critical size is 50 adult members, a number sufficiently high to discourage development of more permanently small lay-led fellowships and to ensure the potential for reaching an adequate size to be financially and programmatically viable. A number of small fellowships (172 with fewer than 60 members) continue to exist, including some from that first ten-year wave, while a larger number of congregations that began as lay-led fellowships have become churches in most senses of the word, whether or not they retained their original names.

## **Outreach Challenges: The West and the South**

In 1949, Edwin Broome wrote in the Unitarian magazine *Christian Register* that the West and South, two promising areas for potential church growth, were quite different from the Unitarian “homeland” in New England:

“...in the West, Unitarianism has retained its sectarian character... [showing an] aggressiveness and a kind of missionary spirit quite absent from New England... [there are] two types of [Unitarian] churches in the South: the pre-Civil War Unitarian Church, and the new churches now being established by the American Unitarian Association department of Church Extension and Maintenance... [in the South there is] a kind of fundamentalism in reverse... confining itself to a humanism which is in the last analysis just as intolerant as the fundamentalism against which it has rebelled.”

Western independence and frontier spirit offered an ideal framework for the development of small fellowships, and indeed, in the 13 states of the far west, 47 small fellowships survive to this day, or more than a quarter of the total. In the South, the extreme humanist response to fundamentalism also lent itself to the development of fellowships as intellectual debating societies, although those fellowships have showed a greater tendency to evolve into what Bartlett calls fellowship churches.

In the Thomas Jefferson district, which encompasses large parts of the South and is an area of rapid growth, 31 congregations were organized as fellowships between 1948 and 1980, which might reasonably be regarded as the time boundaries of the fellowship movement. Since 1980, another 19 new congregations have birthed in the district, joining only nine pre-1948 congregations (six urban and three small Universalist churches). Thus, more than half the congregations in the district, accounting for some 5,800 members, are a product of the fellowship movement. Florida, which is in a different district, was also a strong source of fellowships, with 15 in the first wave and 12 in the second wave.

The growth of Unitarianism in the west, particularly in Texas, California and Washington, was also largely a product of the fellowship movement. Bartlett identified 30 congregations in California (there were actually 31) founded as fellowships in the first 10 years, of which four had already become churches by 1958. Eighteen more congregations have since been organized as fellowships in California. Texas accounted for 13 of the first wave of fellowships. Since 1958, an additional 12 congregations in Texas have been organized as fellowships. Washington organized 16 fellowships in the first wave and seven since that time.

## What Happened to the Fellowships?

In *Bright Galaxies*, Bartlett identified 315 fellowships organized during the first 10 years, of which 40 had died and 26 had converted to church status. By 1968, as the fellowship movement began to wane, there were 500 fellowships, 80 of which had become churches.

At the end of the first 10 years, 40 percent of the congregations in the AUA were lay-led fellowships. Where were those 249 fellowships 40 years later? The current UUA directory shows about 20 percent of them no longer on the radar screen, another 30 percent remaining as relatively small congregations (less than 60 members), and the remaining 50 percent of a sufficient size to support a full “fellowship church” program with some of the trappings of permanence. Many of them have called ministers, built buildings, and hired support staff. Some of these congregations have grown quite large.

More than one-third of the 249 first wave fellowships (88) were concentrated in the Southeast and in California, Washington and Texas in the West. In the Thomas Jefferson district, only four of the 31 congregations organized as fellowships between 1948 and 1980 have persisted as small, unministered congregations, with two of them reporting a membership of less than 20. The largest congregation in the district, Eno River in Durham, NC, started life as a lay-led fellowship in 1966. In South Carolina, five of the six congregations organized as fellowships between 1950 and 1977 are now ministered congregations with memberships ranging from 90 to 339. The sixth fellowship in Aiken no longer exists, but the area is served by a nearby Georgia congregation that started as a lay-led fellowship. Prior to the fellowship movement, South Carolina’s only liberal religious presence was the Charleston church dating from 1772 and several small Universalist churches, of which one still survives.

Thus, for the growing southeast, the fellowship movement was the driving thrust that established a liberal religious presence in the heart of the Bible Belt, and the rate of “conversion” from fellowship format to church format has been extremely high, although many elements of that original questioning, small-group oriented, lay leadership kind of fellowship culture remain strong in many of the region’s congregations.

In Florida, 13 of the original 15 fellowships from the first wave remain in existence, but only one is still a small fellowship (Panama City) and the others ranging in size from 60 to 307 members. Among the second group of 12, there are seven small fellowships (60 members or less) and five larger congregations ranging from 68 to 188 members. At this time, nine out of 27 congregations that were organized as fellowships in Florida still fit the original fellowship concept.

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In California, the current UUA and district directories shows that 10 of the original 31 fellowships have disappeared from the radar screen, while 12 report more than 100 members. Only three fellowships from this group report less than 40 members. In the second wave, another 19 congregations have been organized as fellowships in the state; six have more than 100 members, while eleven remain small fellowships with 40 members or fewer. Thus California, fertile ground for development of fellowships, has only 13 fellowships that retain the original vision...

In Texas, of the original 13 fellowships, only two have disappeared, and none has grown to over 100 members, although six have 60 or more members. Dallas (56 members) and Houston (76 members) both have “second wave” fellowships coexisting with large ministered congregations, while another 10 “second wave” fellowships range in size from 12 to 26 members. With 17 congregations that are fellowships in terms of both name and size, under 60 members, and none of the original group growing past 100 members, Texas appears to have the highest “survival” rate of the fellowship concept of size and structure.

In Washington, five of the original 16 fellowships have disappeared and only three remain “fellowship size.” The remaining eight survivors range in size from 97 members upwards. Of the seven new units organized since the first wave, only three remain in the fellowship size range of 60 members or fewer. Washington now has six small fellowships out of 23 congregations established in that form.

### **Fellowship Culture and Unitarian Universalism: Conflicting Views**

Broome in 1949 was optimistic, not just about the Fellowship as a growth strategy, but also about its capacity to restore what he considered an essential element of Unitarianism:

“American Unitarianism will be stronger the more it preserves its sectarian aspects, and weaker only when it seeks to follow as a kind of pale reflection of normal American Protestantism.”

Other observers of the character of fellowships have echoed Broome in both positive and negative ways. There is no doubt that sects bear the same relationship to the Unitarian (Universalist) religious movements that the sects have borne to the established churches from the time of the Reformation, both Magisterial and Radical. But to have a sect within the body of the larger movement created some unique challenges and opportunities. Bartlett, writing early in the now half-century history of the fellowship movement, was almost unreservedly enthusiastic about some of the contributions that fellowships made to the larger movement, including a stronger notion of shared ministry, the idea of talkback or conversation following the sermon, and the recognition of the importance of small

groups either by themselves or within the larger congregation. She quotes approvingly from a sermon by her husband Josiah R. Bartlett's sermon:

“..the confrontation of our churches by our fellowship has already taken us a step or two toward the right solution [of a new kind of minister]. Our basic premise is...that each of us is a channel for

the divine, and that all we do in our relationship one with another may be regarded as a process of sharing...the job or leadership is as a bearer of resources which enable the individual religious liberals to achieve a satisfactory relatedness: to themselves, their fellows, their universe...[the minister functions] as bearer of resources: prophet, administrator, teacher, counselor, etc. The point ... is to raise the question of how many of these roles he must fulfill, how many can be fulfilled by lay persons, or generally, what gradation of leadership is desirable or feasible in groups varying in size from the smallest to the largest.”

Some of the drawbacks to the fellowship movement were noted by Bartlett herself. She recognized some of the leadership problems, the domination of a small group by a few difficult individuals, the unwillingness to share leadership, the casual and sometimes foolish acquisition of “backdoor” ministers, lay or ordained, without adequate thought and planning. She recognized the evolving fellowship brand of Unitarianism with strong anti-clerical, anti-institutional, ahistorical, anti-ritual, heavily humanist and rational orientation that was often opposed to growth and to the loss of intimacy and genuine religious diversity that might come with developing into a church. At the same time, she noted the challenges of adequate space and the need for a religious education program that could only be sustained by a larger group and with more of a commitment to structure and planning in finances and program.

Finally, Bartlett puts her finger on some of the unique and largely positive contributions made by fellowships to the larger culture of the Unitarian Universalist movement. Talkback originated in fellowships. Fellowships have been more open, more experimental. Fellowships have strongly encouraged the development of lay leaders; some of them have become ministers or denominational leaders, others have carried a firmer notion of shared leadership between the minister and the laity into other congregations when they relocated. In her overall evaluation, she argues that the fellowship movement succeeded in what it tried to do in terms of geographic expansion and number of people reached, bringing liberal religion to a new and different audience and forcing the Unitarians to reflect on themselves in many areas.

With another 40 years to reflect, the evaluation of the fellowship movement is more mixed. In a sermon delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sonoma County on March 24, 1994, the late Rev. Dan O'Neal offered a retrospective on the movement. He quotes an unnamed official in the denomination's Extension Department about his evaluation of the Fellowship movement. His answer:

“I never would have done it. If it hadn't been for the Fellowship movement, we could have had a million members by now. It killed us. It aimed at smallness. I think Fellowships ought to die and the movement should be dead. I sometimes tell these dysfunctional Fellowships I encounter that they should just go out of existence and start over again. The movement just killed us. For over 40 years, we've been tied up in small, anti-clerical, rational families. I've got statistics which show that congregations which start out with less than 30 members will likely will not grow. Half of those that start off with 30 to 40 members will grow. All groups that start off with 50 or more members will grow. Nowadays, groups can still organize as fellowships but we don't support them from this department. The districts support them. We're trying to get the Board to up the minimum membership requirements so these small groups can't be recognized.”

Expressed in the language of marketing, Unitarianism was clearly plagued by “rogue franchises”-local organizations bearing the name of the larger movement but not representing its values, its history, its diversity in a fashion that would enable the average visitor to give Unitarian Universalism a reasonable evaluation as a potential religious home. In smaller communities, where a small, lay-led, inbred, highly humanist, anti-ritual, anti-clerical lay led fellowship is often the only representation of Unitarian Universalism, the marketing impact of fellowship culture on the larger movement can be highly negative.

Not all of O'Neal's responses were as negative. Here is a perspective from another unnamed minister quoted by O'Neal:

“..the denomination is healthier because of the movement. These Fellowship people brought a lot of energy with them. Lots of people would never have joined an existing Unitarian church. For all the negativity, there was a theological vitality that came out of it all. The recovery of the pagan movement, for instance, and the contributions of feminism came out of that negativity. And although much of it was just instinctual bashing and lashing out, there was much that needed to be criticized. If you really believe in the Protestant principle, every single aspect of religion is in danger of becoming idolatrous and needs to be challenged. If all we had had were our traditional churches, there wouldn't have been the diversity or openness of our denomination. It's possible to indulge in pure negativity, but if it is transformed into

redemptive or restorative energy, it is eventually positive. Anyway, we didn't have the money to start an extension program back then. It was either the Fellowship program or nothing."

O'Neal identifies three areas of tension between fellowship culture and church culture that surfaced in many of his interviews. One, of course, was anti-clericalism, an old strain in Protestantism to which the fellowship movement gave new life. Fellowships were often hostile environments for visiting clergy and antipathetic to calling clergy when they reached a size that could no longer be adequately served solely by lay volunteers. A second is the almost exclusive focus on the intellectual to the exclusion of emotional or aesthetic or contemplative aspects of worship. Small fellowships often described their Sunday morning gatherings as programs rather than worship, sometimes even as lectures or discussions. The third area of tension was the nature and degree of clear distinction between the secular and the sacred, not in an integrative way but by denial of the existence of a meaningful sphere of the sacred. All of these drawbacks he attributes in part to their failure to acknowledge the historical context of the movement of which they claimed as their own. O'Neal suggests that the following statement be emblazoned on the doorway of Fellowships as a corrective:

"Whoever would build permanently must build on the past, he must take the foundation which is given him in the institutions and ideas of the Church, whose offspring he is. He must graft himself on the old stock, and know that he bears not the root, but the root him. It is easy, I say, to deny; a small modicum of talent is required to assail and repudiate existing beliefs. But the true reformer accepts existing beliefs, and unfolds the truth that is in them into new and nobler forms of faith."

## **Transitions**

Ministers who presided over the transition of fellowships to ministered congregations report experiences that are challenging, sometimes harrowing, sometimes enriching. My own congregation is blessed with two such ministers. Rev. Ralph Stutzman, now retired, was the first minister of the Huntington (NY) congregation. Rev. Cynthia Prescott interned in a congregation that had much earlier transitioned from fellowship to ministered congregation and has been for more than three years the first (extension) minister to a fellowship that had been lay-led for 44 years. In addition, Dan O'Neal (himself the first minister to a fellowship) interviewed several such ministers as background for his sermon on fellowships.

Stutzman served the Huntington congregation for 18 years. He was able to work with a demand for strong lay leadership and shared ministry in some innovative ways that made the transition work to the satisfaction of most of those involved, with the congregation growing to 350 members by the time he left. Stutzman recognizes that fellowships have "chewed up" a lot of their first ministers. It

is a challenging assignment; the minister must be willing to share the work of the ministry and build on the existing leadership. On balance, his evaluation of the fellowship movement in retrospect is positive. He does not worry about a few “rogue franchises” embarrassing the movement as a whole, and feels that the fellowship experiment has reached a number of people who might not have found Unitarian Universalism otherwise and has encouraged experimentation with worship, programming and organizational structure.

Prescott also finds generally positive values in the fellowship movement, although she shares Stutzman’s concern about the effect on some ministers who are the first minister to a lay-led fellowship because of the challenges of the transition. These challenges include sharing authority, tensions over forms and styles of worship, and relations with the district and the larger movement. She also observes from the two congregations she has worked with closely and others with whom she has had briefer encounters that the fellowship part of a congregation’s history shapes the community’s story and way of being in the world in a more or less permanent fashion, although it may be somewhat attenuated by the immigration of people from more traditional congregations and the departure of some of the more determined advocates of a fellowship style of community.

O’Neal, whose own entire experience was as the first regular called minister of a lay-led fellowship, found similar observations in his interviews. Ministers reported being ignored or shunned, having to choose their words carefully, constantly having their authority questioned, and resistance to any ritualized worship forms. Nothing was accepted without examination. While the experience of leading a fellowship through such a transition can be very hard on ministers, who often report frustration, weariness, and burnout, these same aspects of fellowship culture also account for much of the vibrancy, active participation and creativity of fellowships as worship communities.

## **Conclusion**

The Fellowship movement in Unitarianism, which had a solid twenty-year run before dwindling into oblivion over the next 10 to 15 years, was a unique experiment in growth strategy. Most centralized bureaucracies plant franchises only with a significant degree of both investment and control from the top. The fellowship movement did neither. It provided almost no financial resources, offered limited training and advice, and exerted virtually no control over these numerous small, lay-led groups of Unitarians throughout the country. While there have been fellowships whose anti-clerical, ahistorical, anti-worship, strongly humanist/intellectual ambience may have discouraged potential members, these fellowships and others made Unitarianism available to countless parts of the country that could not have had that experience in any other way, given the limited resources available at the denominational level.

At least half of the fellowships-more than 60 percent of the survivors-have evolved into full-fledged congregations, most of them with ministers and/or buildings and religious education programs, contributing both money and human resources to their districts and the UUA. They have infused vitality into a religious movement that needed to transcend its regional parochialism. At the same time, there has been a real cost to this method of expansion. Many people became Unitarians without any sense of the movement's history, traditions, and purpose. Fellowships became the representative of Unitarianism in places that might otherwise have been potential locales for the development for a more mainstream representation of the tradition. Ministers who undertook the challenging transition of some of these fellowships to congregations that were more fully integrated into Unitarian Universalism went through some trying and sometimes even harrowing experiences. Forty years after Laile Bartlett's chronicling of the beginnings of the fellowship movement, her bright galaxies burn even more brightly in some communities, are dimmer in others, and have turned into black holes in still others. As an experiment in church extension the fellowship movement has ended, but its influence will be felt in Unitarian Universalism for many decades to come.

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