

THE REUNION (1954-Present)

From the rapid succession of pastors after World War 1, we can surmise that the church fell again on hard times and by the early fifties, questions about its survival must have been troubling. At the same time another West Bridgewater congregation, the Sunset Avenue Congregational Church, was experiencing dwindling membership and support and looking at a similar future. This congregation had been a new church start by the Massachusetts Conference of Congregational Churches in 1920. After months of conversations and negotiations, the two churches agreed to merge in 1954. At the time of the merger, the Conference Yearbook reported 78 members for the Sunset Avenue Church and an average attendance of 29 for Sunday worship. Eighty one children and 31 youth were listed, and the pastor of record was the Rev. D.R. Dunbar. The Congregationalists sold their building to a candy factory and moved into the First Church.

The reunion of these two Christian traditions after nearly 120 years of separation was a relatively smooth transition theologically speaking. Throughout its Unitarian years, the official name of the church had remained the "First Congregational Church (Unitarian) of West Bridgewater". In 1956 the name was amended in the Constitution and Bylaws to read: "The First Congregational-Unitarian Church of West Bridgewater". This language remained until 1989 when the present name of "the First Church of West Bridgewater" was selected. The church is currently affiliated with the two denominations of its past: the United Church of Christ, (founded in 1957 by the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church), and the Unitarian Universalist Association (founded in 1964 by the Unitarians and the Universalists). After nearly 120 years, the church reaffirmed its historic roots and an ecumenical vision of the future.

(350 Years: The First Church of West Bridgewater, Massachusetts, 1651-2001, p. 10)

Covenant Renewal

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?" So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these rocks will be . . . just rocks." Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans and some will become clouds, and some water will be . . . just water." Then the angels said, "well God, it's nearer now, but is it finished?" And God answered . . . "NOPE!" On some of the rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things that only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, "Is this world finished now? And God answered "NOPE!" God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, "I am tired now. Please finish up the world for me . . . Really it's almost done." But the man and woman said, "We can't finish the world alone! You have the plans and we are too little" "You are big enough," God answered them. "But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner." The man and woman asked, "What's a partner?" and God answered. "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and the days you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That's the deal.' And they all agreed to that deal. Then the angels asked God "Is the world finished yet? And God answered, I don't know. Go ask my partners." (source unknown)

In our church we partner with one another by making and keeping promises with one another. We call our promises covenants because that is the Biblical word for them. Biblical covenants are sacred because the Lord is the One who makes the promises and names the terms of the agreement with God's

people. In the church, it's the Holy Spirit who unites partners in Love to do the work of Jesus. An interesting thing about covenants is that they can be updated and revised so that God's partners can do the Creator's work in their time and circumstance. According to our Biblical stories the Lord made the first covenant with Noah (rainbow); then Abraham and Sarah (land and descendants); then Moses (ten commands); then David (nation state); then the followers of Jesus (church).

In 1954 when the Sunset Avenue Church and the First Congregational Church (Unitarian) of West Bridgewater merged, controversy arose over a broken covenant. Before the merger it had been agreed upon that both settled ministers would resign, and a new pastor would be called to serve. But a problem arose when the church could not find anyone that they could afford. So they asked Rev. Paul Lauffer to continue on as their minister. Serving until 1959, he helped the congregation grieve the loss of members who had left the church. He helped to bring it together through the adoption of dual theological covenants.

Unitarian Universalist

"In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus,
we unite for the worship of God and the service of man".

Congregationalist

"Acknowledging Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord, and accepting the Holy Scripture as our rule of faith and practice, and the duty of uniting ourselves for Christian fellowship, the enjoyment of Christian administration, the public worship of God and the advancement of His kingdom in the world. We do now, in the sight of God and invoking his blessing, solemnly covenant and agree with each other to associate ourselves to be a church of the Lord Jesus Christ as warranted by the word of God. We agree to maintain the institution of the Gospel, to submit ourselves to the orderly administration of the affairs of the church, and to walk together in brotherly love and this we do depending on our Heavenly Father who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son for our salvation, and of Jesus Christ who has redeemed us with his blood and of the Holy Spirit our Comforter and guide. (ibid, p. 11).

The adoption of dual covenants created a safe space for differences in belief and practice, fostered acceptance of one

another, and paved the way for our current covenant which begins with the statement of faith: 'We the members of The First Church of West Bridgewater united by the love of one another and guided by the teachings of Jesus . . . ' Here, two teachings from Jesus on love come to us as relationship mandates. The first: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength'. The second: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. In gospel speak this means that there is no relationship in life, law, or eternity greater than these. In his commentary on the first relationship biblical scholar Marcus Borg wrote: 'You can keep the commandments and still be a jerk. But you cannot be in relationship with the loving God, without being continually transformed by 'God, the Great, 'I AM' which means, to be what the future demands. Rev. Ron Buford explained: 'Our God is not a God of outmoded rules and laws, keeping people separated---people do that. By contrast, the rule of God's living love is to always take another look and see the relationship with each other and God as primary. If you want to know where God is, Jesus says, look to where the Love of God bends toward making the life of each person as wonderful as God wants life to be for us in light of the present. As covenantal members of this church we promise to bend together in this present light of Holy Love. In this church, we partner with each other to continue on with the work that Jesus did. Our work is to offer gifts of compassionate care, to cure the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the lepers, to cast out demons, to do justice, to free the oppressed, to forgive and reconcile. When we haven't a clue about what that means, we put our heads together and talk about the ways in which we are 'called as partners in Christ's service'. . . as we prayerfully consider verse from that hymn.

Called as partners in Christ's service, called to ministries of grace,
We respond with deep commitment, fresh new lines of faith to trace.
May we learn the art of sharing, side by side and friend with friend.
Equal partners in our caring, to fulfill God's end. Amen.

And the angels asked God, "Is the world finished yet? And God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."