

Toward the Beloved Community: The First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, 1865-2015. Cindy Cumfer. Portland: First Unitarian Church, 2015; xiv + 275 pp. (paper)

The genre of “congregational history” is wide-ranging in scope and style. All denominations produce congregational histories: Unitarian Universalism is no different. Many UU congregational histories are short, often self-published in limited quantity, and of varying degrees of accuracy and thoroughness. This style of congregational history is of interest primarily to insiders, to members who already know the congregation. Other UU congregational histories are larger in scope and attract readership beyond the congregation. Recently several fine congregational histories of this second style have made positive contributions to this genre of historical writing (SEE Richard Stower, *The History of the First Parish Church of Scituate, Massachusetts, JUUH* (2013) 191-193).

One of the finest new congregational histories is Cindy Cumfer’s *Toward Beloved Community*. This congregational history came about as many do, as part of anniversary celebrations. This one celebrates the 150th anniversary of First Unitarian Church, Portland, Oregon, one of Unitarian Universalism’s premier congregations. Several factors came together to produce this excellent, two-hundred-page anniversary tribute. For one, Cumfer had good material to work with. First Church Portland has enjoyed vital ministries and equally vital congregational life ever since its founding in 1866: there are many stories to tell. Also, there is plenty of source material to document those stories, reminding us of the importance of maintaining good, workable congregational archives, as First Church has done consistently through the years. Community archives such as at Portland’s Reed College and Lewis and Clark University, and the UUA archives at Harvard University, provided additional source material. Cumfer was also able to consult personal archives of recent ministers of the congregation. Additionally, First Church has a tradition of publishing high quality congregational histories to celebrate anniversaries: the earlier publication, *A Time to Build*, includes a reprint of Earl Morse Wilbur’s history of the church 1867-1892, and Evadne Hilands’ coverage of the years 1893-1966.

Neither vital congregational life nor a plethora of source material would automatically produce an engaging study of a congregation, without a skilled author at the helm. Oregon lawyer Cindy Cumfer holds a Ph.D. in history from UCLA. She brings systematic research to the genre of congregational history: each chapter includes many details about the church which Cumfer ties together to develop common themes of congregational life across its 150-year history.

The book is self-published by First Unitarian Church. An image of the Tree of Life Tapestry given to the congregation in 1970 creates an attractive cover. The sturdy paperback is available through the website, www.firstunitarianportland.org and an online version may be available soon. This 150th anniversary publication partnered an exhibit on the history of First Unitarian Church in 2015 at the Oregon Historical Society in downtown Portland, not far from the location of the church.

One of Cumfer’s goals in writing this history was to stimulate yet greater awareness within the congregation of its identity as a Beloved Community. She hoped to articulate the “soul” of First Church by enumerating core yet evolving beliefs which its ministers and congregants have lived out in the wider world. To that end, *Toward the Beloved Community* should be read by every member of this congregation. A much broader audience of Unitarian Universalists will also want to read about this important congregation and the ministers who contributed significantly to

liberal religion in Portland as well as to the city's social and cultural life. For many Unitarian Universalists, the congregation is perhaps best known for the stand it took for GBLT rights in 1992 by tying a ribbon around the city block the building sits on. Reading this history will identify many other markers of the congregation's contribution to religious life in Portland. Having lived in Portland for a year during my ministerial internship at First Church, I can attest to there being hardly a better place in this country to build a mutually supportive partnership between the liberal church and the surrounding community.

In addition to readership among Unitarian Universalists, residents of Portland seeking to know more about the religious history of their city will want to read about First Church. Cumfer has put her skills as a trained historian to good use by including brief but well-placed historical contexts of city and national events in each of the seven chapters. These summaries reinforce the self-evident premise that this has been and continues to be a congregation well in touch with the spiritual and justice-making needs of the world around it.

Another of Cumfer's goals was to write a congregational history that is not solely self-congratulatory --- as some publications in this genre are --- but which tells an authentic story of both triumphs and challenges in living out the core spiritual values of the community. She tells the congregation's story as it has been lived. Financial shortfalls are a recurring theme, even among this largely upper-middle class membership. Another pervasive challenge is the limitations white privilege places on seeing the broader world of Portland and the country. Some UUs may find comfort in realizing that this large, thriving congregation deals with many of the same challenges as in their own congregations.

Cumfer organized her study by one of the most obvious methods for a congregational history: defining chapters by the tenure of the senior ministers. The church has had long ministries: just seven in its 150 years, counting the three short ministries from 1893 to 1906 as one ministerial period. We may note in particular the influence of the Eliot family for two-thirds of a century.

1. The founding ministry of Thomas Lamb Eliot (1867-1893) marked the arrival of this influential family on the west coast from St. Louis, where Thomas' father founded that city's Unitarian Church.
2. Thomas Lamb's daughter married assistant minister Earl Morse Wilbur, the first of the three ministers who served the church during its shortest and most varied period of ministry (1893-1906). Wilbur was followed by William Lord and George Cressley.
3. The tenure of William Greenleaf Eliot (1907-1933), son of Thomas Lamb, included the move to the current location on Salmon Street. This Eliot promoted a 'manly' ministry: he was not particularly open to women's suffrage and feminist attitudes.
4. Richard Steiner (1934-66) led the congregation through the end of the Depression into post-World War II growth. The end of his ministry saw the devastating 1965 fire which destroyed the Salmon Street sanctuary. Steiner's vigorous social gospel message clearly put the church on the map in the Portland religious community.
5. Alan Deale (1970-1991) grew the congregation into one of the largest in the UUA and added the current Music Director, Mark Slegers, to the staff in 1977.
6. Marilyn Sewall's advocacy-driven ministry (1992-2009) partnered well with the city's increasing progressiveness. The growing membership, plagued by governance challenges, was among the first UU congregations to implement policy governance. Rev. Sewall exemplified the transformative power of worship to deepen spiritual experiences through her often edgy sermons.

7. The current minister and the congregation's first clergy of color, William Sinkford (2010 – present), came to Portland after two terms as UUA President. He continues to lead a thriving home for the spiritual deepening of members and for outreach to the community.

While chapters are defined by the tenures of these ministers, Cumfer tracks other common threads across the chapters, to include the role of the board and the broader topic of governance; the growing number of staff members; programs in congregational life, highlighting music and religious education; noteworthy lay leaders, many of whom are highlighted in stand-alone vignettes; and perhaps most important to the sustenance of the church, the Ladies Sewing Circle, which birth the idea 150 years ago to found a free church in Portland and which continues today as the Alliance. The book includes many photos which give a face to people and places discussed in the text. Regrettably some of these images suffer from less than top quality reproduction.

The story of this community of liberal seekers in Portland who have integrated internal spiritual deepening and external work in the world explains well how First Unitarian Church Portland has not only survived but thrived for a century and a half. This congregational history can serve as both resource and inspiration for other congregations, so to move the denomination of Unitarian Universalism all the more “Toward Beloved Community.”

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