

A CVUUF History: The First 50 Years

-LTH August 2011

1962-73

In December 1961 six couples showed up for a meeting of people interested in establishing a Unitarian Universalist presence in this area then making an uneasy transition from ranching communities to LA suburbs. Looking for a haven of liberal expression for themselves and religious education for their children, our founders quickly organized under the UUA's Fellowship model. In February 1962 we joined the UUA as the Tri-Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. By 1963 the Fellowship was publishing a monthly newsletter and meeting two Sundays a month at the old YMCA. We made a name for ourselves locally, in a community where the John Birch Society was very active, by taking strong positions against racism and the Vietnam War and in support of the United Nations. The Fellowship was active in district affairs and at De Benneville Pines UU camp/conference center. In September 1967 we hired Rev. Richard Harris (also serving part-time at the Ventura church) as our first part-time minister. With his help we began to run both adult and children's programming every week, nine months a year. In 1968 we became the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Conejo Valley.

In September 1969 the Fellowship marked its commitment to permanence by purchasing a medium-sized house. Leaders exulted that "The difficult period of birthing is over and now we must flourish and grow." CVUUF life featured an active schedule of programs and parties, with Rich continuing as a frequent guest speaker. In 1970 our Statement of Purpose was written. High points of the early seventies included numerous youth coffee houses in the Fellowship House garage, taking over the Conejo Playhouse for a production of "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" and organizing a very well-attended presentation by nutritionist Adelle Davis in one of the town's largest venues, the California Lutheran College gym.

1974-1989

By 1974, however, Fellowship House had become more of a burden than an asset. The house was sold, and proceeds of around \$5,000 were dedicated to a building fund for future use. For several years the Fellowship met mostly at the Thousand Oaks Community Center and then the T.O. Arts Council. Anticipating a new phase in our history, we called Rev. Marvin Steinmetz to become CVUUF's first exclusive minister in 1977. Although members initially received Marvin with great enthusiasm, by the end of his first year the board was distressed to acknowledge that membership had fallen from 42 adults to 20 and financial support had also dropped sharply. Marvin was dismissed by the congregation in December 1978.

Our next part time minister was Rev. Jim Hooper. We met in Church of the Oaks' Fellowship Hall from 1982-89. This location provided adequate space for our adult services, with RE classes held on a small covered patio. To our great disappointment, Jim moved to Northern California in 1984 and we were unable to replace him. Our small Fellowship continued to meet every Sunday morning, nine months a year, with a variety of in-house and guest speakers.

1989-1998

In September 1989, we began our current orientation toward growth by moving to the new YMCA to gain indoor space for our Sunday School program. This created some momentum, and in January 1991 we hired Rev. Dick Weston-Jones (also serving part-time at the Santa Paula church) as our part-time minister. After another year, CVUUF needed bigger space for both worship and RE and Dick took up a full-time position at the Ventura church. In September 1992 we moved to Old Meadows Park and hired Rev. Lex Crane (recently retired from the Santa Barbara church) as our part-time minister. This was an even more successful experience, and after two years we moved back to the Church of the Oaks—this time renting the entire facility (worship in the Sanctuary, RE in the Sunday School building, and coffee hour in Fellowship Hall). In 1994, although we were entirely happy with Lex's service, CVUUF decided to hire Rev. Jack Crane, who was able to make a fuller commitment to us.

Wanting to grow toward becoming a small church with a full-time minister, we sent Jack to Boston for the UUA's Extension Minister training. He came back with real enthusiasm for transforming CVUUF into a "multi-celled church," and with his encouragement small groups began to proliferate. We started to hold Sunday services year-round and initiated multiple choirs. The Council of Committees made our larger organization more efficient. We moved toward professionalization of other Fellowship operations, hiring members as our RE and music directors.

In 1996 Church of the Oaks was sold and we moved to the local senior center, a large, high-quality facility with low rental costs and many classroom spaces. It would be our part-time home for the next 12 years. During Jack's tenure we became known in our district as "the church with all the kids," a title we are still proud to claim. Unfortunately, by September 1997 Jack was not able to continue as our minister. At the time of his resignation, we had around 100 adult members and about 80 children in RE. It is a triumph of our lay leadership that Worship, RE, and Caring activities continued without interruption and membership and attendance grew slightly during our congregation's subsequent year without a minister.

1998-2011

The arrival in September 1998 of Rev. Betty Stapleford as CVUUF's first full-time minister brought stability to our pulpit and much more. Initially coming to us as an extension minister, she was called by the congregation in 2000. During her tenure CVUUF became a Welcoming Congregation, started a local CUUPS chapter, and more fully embraced the concept of "small group ministry." Our first Long-Range Plan set out our goal of becoming a mid-size congregation, and Justine Fischer was hired as DRE. The early 2000s also featured the beginning of Neighborhood Networks (forming a geographical base for CVUUF Caring and social activities) and regular public street-corner vigils against first the Iraq War and then Proposition 8 (the state constitutional amendment outlawing same-sex marriage). Betty was the prime mover in creating our Lay Ministry program and our readers' theatre group Chalice Players. A high-level focus on governance led to adoption of a policy-based Board of Trustees, along with operating authority vested in the Council of Directors.

The Fellowship's main preoccupation during 2005-8 was the long and difficult process of acquiring our new home. After two capital campaigns and countless other hurdles both physical and bureaucratic, we held our first service at our new facility in July 2008. By this time adult membership was nearly 200, and RE enrollment was almost 100. The impact of having fulltime space of our own has been extremely positive. With our move we made the jump to two Sunday morning services. Immediately we also celebrated the creation of two of the Fellowship's most beloved current features: our speakers and films program Community Forum and our folk/rock band Soulstice.

Betty retired in July 2010, launching the Fellowship into a one-year transition with our interim minister, Rev. Helen Carroll. The congregation became fully engaged in an extensive ministerial search process which resulted in CVUUF calling Rev. Lora Brandis, who began her service with us August 15, 2011.

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Stalwart lay leaders of the Fellowship's first decade included Jerry & Phyllis Comstock, Fran & Neil Kanawyer, Dan & Pat Lomax, and Jean & Jerry Sohl.

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Lay leaders of the 1970s and 1980s included the Lomaxes and Sohls along with Mary Freed, Floyd & Mary Martin, Mary Hunter, Frances Pardee, Lotta Hempel, and Jo Ann Van Reenan. Arlene Bloom and Lorella & Todd Hess joined the Fellowship at the end of this period.

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New lay leaders coming on board in the 1990s included Dennis Weiher & Kathy Matthews, Darcey Lober, Theadora Davitt-Cornyn, Robin Lindsey, Justine Fischer, Annie & David Barker, Gary & Sylvia Johnson, Jeff Goldstein, Margaret & Richard Griffin, Beth & Howard Bierman, and Hank & Julie Crooks.

1998-2010

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Lay leaders coming to CVUUF in the early 2000s included Mike Talvola, Bill & Carol Robinson, Liza Diniakos & Willie Lubka, Casey & Renee Dake, Chuck & Laure McKinnon, Jill & Peter Schlaus, Gordon Clint & Barbara Leighton, Claudia & Rick Barton, Abdallah Alsadek & Dana Ryon, Pamela Lopez & Matthew Weisman, Laura & Tim McLean, Lynne Herron, Debbie & Merlin Snider, and Peter Farriday.