

"Creating the Dream" In 2002 this small lay-led fellowship decided that they wanted to create a different future for themselves. What did they decide? What did it take for us to be where we are today? Worship Leader: Bryan Plude; Worship Associate: Megan Johnson.

Objective: Acquaint the current membership (and remind longtime members) where we were and what it took to get to where we are now.

In 1962, this fellowship called the Rev. Lewis McGee as our settled minister. This was historic, because Lewis McGee was black. At the time of our call, McGee was 69 years old. He had been a minister for 45 years, and had been a Unitarian for more than 30. His call here was the first time a black man (at that time UU ministers were almost always men); this was the first time a black man had been called as a senior minister to a predominately white Unitarian Universalist congregation.<sup>1</sup> Back then, you see, we were also the "Little Church that Could."

We were formally organized as a Unitarian Fellowship in 1953, after meeting informally in people's homes since 1949.

We acquired this property in 1955. At that time there was only one building, what we now call the Fellowship Hall, where worship was held for many years.

In 1959, we called Richard Boeke, our first minister, 1/2-time. In 1962 we called our second minister, the Reverend Lewis McGee. After Lewis McGee left for southern California to be with his children, we called and ordained the Reverend Arthur Wilmot in 1963.

The 60's were a turbulent time in this nations' history. Those were years of civil rights protests, Viet Nam War protests and assassinations--first President John Kennedy, then his brother Robert and Martin Luther King. Chico and our church were not exempt from that turbulence. Arthur Wilmot answered Martin Luther King's call to Selma in 1965, along with many other Unitarian Universalist ministers. The UU minister James Reeb was killed there.

The Rev. Wilmot also took a stand with the Chico Council of Churches by refusing to affirm Trinitarian beliefs. He left, with other churches supporting his right, to form the Chico Area Interfaith Council, which is still active today.

Viet Nam. Where would the 60's be without Viet Nam? At a baccalaureate address at Chico High School, the Rev. Wilmot advocated to seniors that they inform themselves before enlisting. It wasn't a "don't enlist" speech; he just suggested that the young men do their homework. Evidently, this was too much anti-war rhetoric for many in the community. Wilmot left Chico in 1968 for a larger church in Victoria, British Columbia, but he confided that pressure from the wider Chico community contributed to his departure. Under the Rev. Wilmot's leadership, our fellowship had grown to about 100 people.

Can you imagine it? Are you still with me? How many of you have heard this stuff before?

The mists of history keep many secrets. One of them is why this Fellowship decided not to call a minister to follow Arthur Wilmot. From 1968 until 2004, when the Rev. Lydia Ferranti-Rosbery

began preaching here one weekend each month, we were without a regular minister. Membership reportedly became as few as 10!

Our resident historian, Lucy Sperlin, began attending this Fellowship in 1962. After being away from Chico for a number of years, she rejoined the Fellowship in 2000. Lucy relayed to me the attitude of the PCD staff when she was a board member of the PCD in the 1990's. "Just write Chico off," was their attitude, after decades of our Fellowship insisting on finding our own path, outside the greater UU community.

That began to change in 2002, when the members decided to hire an organizational development consultant to help them chart a new course. Nearly all of the 58 members participated in the one day session. A clear call for ministerial services emerged as the number one priority. Hiring a minister was going to take many things, but among them was more money. The 2003 budget increased by 2/3, or 67%! In 2004, it increased by another 14%.

At a recent dinner, some of our long term members reflected on that time period. One said, "I realized that I was going to have to step up in a new way financially."

Serendipitously, about this time the PCD began to kick around the idea of a weekend ministry to help small congregations grow. Lucy tells the story. (paraphrasing) It was just an idea, but I grabbed onto it, realizing it was just what we needed. I kept talking to people, prodding them to bring this idea to fruition. Thanks to then director, Cilla Raughley, they did, and in 2004 the Rev. Lydia Ferranti-Rosbery arrived in Chico to be with us one weekend each month.

As things moved behind the scenes toward bringing in Lydia, our Fellowship met in small groups to continue the work begun in the long range planning workshop. We developed a mission statement, which you see at the top of our Order of Service, and a Vision. Can you read our Mission Statement with me?

**MISSION:** The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Chico is to serve our community by welcoming all, supporting religious freedom and practice, encouraging spiritual and intellectual growth, and being actively involved in social action, all within the framework of Unitarian Universalist Principles.

Reads pretty well, doesn't it?

I'd like also to read to you our vision statement:

**Our vision** is that "In the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Chico, people find encouragement for spiritual exploration, inspiration for social involvement, and acceptance. Our community is characterized by diversity and open thinking, is nurtured by shared ministry, and is inspired by trained Unitarian Universalist leadership as well as a physical environment of warmth and beauty."

Let's take stock. How have we done?

From our vision statement: "People find encouragement for spiritual exploration." I

hope that I do that with my sermons. Our worship associates delve into their spiritual exploration in their reflections. With Sydney and Dennis you explored these things through small groups and adult Religious Exploration. I plan to reinstitute these things as I become more settled here.

"We are nurtured by shared ministry." How do we share our ministries? Well, an obvious way is through our worship associates, who bring a different voice to this pulpit. Our music ministry is a collaborative effort between our Music Director, Mary Collins, our accompanist, Sarah Donnelly and our choir. Our children and other brave souls occasionally fill in on percussion. Our social outreach ministry is assisted by the many who stepped up to help with Safe Space for the homeless and who volunteer to help serve meals at the Torres Shelter. I meet monthly with the Sunshine Committee, those who take on the ministry of helping our members in need with visits, meals and rides.

"We are characterized by diversity and open thinking." We have gone through the process and hard work of becoming a Welcoming Congregation, meaning that we are accepting and proactive in supporting members of the LGBTQ communities. A large banner hangs on the front of our Fellowship building, proclaiming this to all who pass. We continue to address diversity in all its aspects. We are still predominately white, and may always be so, but we strive to be welcoming. Becoming more age diverse is very high on our list of priorities.

"We are inspired by trained Unitarian Universalist leadership." I know that many of you were inspired by Sydney and Dennis. I've been told that at least some of you are inspired by my words from this pulpit. Smile. And I am trained--I've got that going for me.

"We are inspired by a physical environment of warmth and beauty." Look around you. Isn't this space amazing? Need I say more?

Marvey Mueller has done a lovely job of summarizing our vision in the poster she created, on display in our lobby.

In addition to the big bumps in our giving in 2003 and 2004, there were places where we stepped up large.

Again, I paraphrase Lucy's words: "A real breakthrough, an amazing breakthrough came when we were nudged into using outside consultant to assess our financial ability to attain a new building. You see, we had a culture of poverty. 'We don't have any money, we can't spend any money, we're poor,' we said to ourselves. The money our consultant thought we could raise in a capital campaign was way bigger than our self-estimation. Our consultant told us, 'If you have a dream, you can do it. Don't feel limited by this number.' Our thinking went from expanding the youth hall to having a whole new building. Ultimately, we surpassed even his estimate by raising 1/4 of a million dollars!" This beautiful building was completed in the fall of 2012.

There was another big push to get to where we are today. You dreamed of calling a minister. The operating budget was not big enough to pay a full-time minister. No problem. You contributed \$65,000 to a Minister's Fund, which supplements our operating budget for five years to pay my nearly full-time salary. By then, we hope to have grown enough in numbers and in giving to sustain professional ministry from our regular budget.

Conclusion: We have come a long way in creating the dream we articulated back in 2002. Some of the leaders who helped formulate and bring that dream to fruition are no longer with us. Petie Padden and Pat Trimbell have moved. Janet Forman, a force among several of us who were instrumental in the construction of this building, died in early 2014. There are undoubtedly others whose names should be mentioned here.

We can breathe. We can enjoy what we have created. And we must look to our future. How are we called to Sustain the Dream of our Vision, of our Mission? This will be the subject of our worship in two weeks, when we celebrate the culmination of our stewardship campaign.

Pause

Amen and Blessed Be

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<sup>i</sup> [http://rickhoyt.com/RickHoyt/Sermons/Entries/2013/5/26\\_Lewis\\_McGee.html](http://rickhoyt.com/RickHoyt/Sermons/Entries/2013/5/26_Lewis_McGee.html) Accessed 3/5/16. Saved as PDF