

THE HISTORY of the CLF

AUA President Frederick May Eliot envisions a 'larger' fellowship beyond the concept of geographical location, in his words:

"a church by mail . . . a church in the fullest sense of the word, a church which will serve isolated religious liberals wherever they live."

On May 24, 1944, the Church of the Larger Fellowship is founded at the Annual Meeting of the American Unitarian Association. The CLF is semi-autonomous: a self-governing member congregation of the Association, but with its budget and leadership under the Extension Department of the AUA with a two-fold purpose:

To provide a spiritual home for isolated Unitarians and their families, and to transfer the allegiance of its members to local Unitarian churches whenever and wherever possible.

American Unitarian Association (AUA) dispatches itinerant ministers and missionary expeditions to fledgling Midwest cities and distant prairies. Universalists devise similar outreach efforts. A Unitarian Women's Alliance forms the "Post Office Mission."

1800s

Rev. William Channing Gannett launches 'Ministry by mail'

1904

With the denominational merger, the Unitarian and Universalist, CLFs conjoin, and the Church of the Larger Fellowship UU is born. The new entity retains the semi-autonomous nature and dual purposes of its predecessors:

To provide a spiritual home and connection for isolated religious liberals as well as programs and services designed to promote the growth of Unitarian Universalism.

1961

The CLF grows from its original charter of 34 members to membership in every state in the USA, eight Canadian provinces, and 20 countries. Geographically clustered CLF members start new fellowships—more than 400 by the end of the 1960s.

1948

The Universalists found their own Church of the Larger Fellowship.

1944

1947

A prisoner at San Quentin becomes the first incarcerated person to join the church.

1965

1970

Facing a budget crisis, the UUA terminates its ownership of the CLF, and we become chartered and legally incorporated as an independent religious society, no longer under the auspices of the Extension Department of the UUA.

1970s
–90s

The next few decades saw significant changes—many under the ministerial leadership of the Rev. Eugene Pickett. Membership now includes people affiliated with a local congregation who also want a 'church by mail.' Small congregations can now join the CLF. This change ushers in a two-fold mission: to provide a spiritual home for isolated religious liberals as well as programs and services designed to promote the growth of Unitarian Universalism. The succeeding ministry of the Rev. Scott Alexander introduces the popular 'minister's 800 line,' increasing the accessibility of pastoral connection with the minister.

1999

The Rev. Jane Rzepka becomes the Senior Minister, and the CLF moves into the new millennium with a creative and contemporary approach. 'Church by mail' became church 'online'; the 'post office mission' becomes a mission by website. The church becomes increasingly de-centralized with board members from diverse geographical locations conducting business via teleconference, e-mail, and annual retreats.

2010

The Rev. Meg A. Riley becomes CLF's Senior Minister bringing the concept of an online sanctuary to include sermons via live stream and online classes via videoconference.

2020

The CLF Board makes a bold new move in calling the Lead Ministry Team of Aisha Hauser, MSW, CRE-ML; Christina Rivera; and Rev. Dr. Michael Tino. This shared ministry team immediately sets out to realign CLF resources to a stewardship model and vision of liberatory theology.

Having embraced its place as the largest and most far-reaching congregation in the UU world, the CLF strives for excellence, relevance, and innovation across the still daunting frontiers of geographical, social, and spiritual separation. Today's CLF sustains spiritual strength of isolated and vulnerable people everywhere, upholding our mission:

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation with no geographical boundary, we create global spiritual community, rooted in profound love, which cultivates wonder, imagination, and the courage to act.