

A Long and Winding Road

The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Saratoga Springs, by Rev. Linda Hoddy

The Vision

The story of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Saratoga Springs begins about twenty miles to our north. In the early 1990s, just out of divinity school, I served the UU Fellowship of Glens Falls as part-time minister. Some of the congregation lived in Saratoga Springs, about a half-hour to the south. People from Saratoga Springs who wanted to be a part of a UU congregation had the choice of traveling north to Glens Falls or south to Schenectady or Albany. Glens Falls is a little easier to get to, so a number of people went there.

When Thanksgiving rolled around each year, the city of Glens Falls had a “Hometown Thanksgiving Dinner,” a big community event in which many people from the Glens Falls congregation participated. But for those from Saratoga Springs, it just didn’t feel like their hometown dinner, and they felt a little estranged from the event.

That became reason number one for starting a UU congregation in Saratoga Springs—*community identity*. People in Saratoga Springs wanted a UU congregation in their own community. They wanted a congregation of their own in which they could participate in social justice witness—in the AIDS walk or in the CROP walk to fight hunger. They wanted a hometown Thanksgiving dinner that was in *their* hometown.

A few years into my ministry in Glens Falls, a lovely family joined the congregation. Ellie Parker was a school psychologist, and her husband, Frank, a chemical engineer. They lived with their son, Dmitri, near Exit 13 of the Northway. The Glens Falls church was at Exit 18, a twenty-five minute ride in the best of weather. They attended services fairly regularly for a few years, and then they stopped coming. I called to see if everything was okay. “Things are fine,” Ellie told me, “but we are just finding it too far to travel. We’re going to try the little United Methodist Church just down the street from us.”

That was reason number two for starting a congregation—*traveling distance*. People in Saratoga Springs found it too far to travel to Glens Falls or to Schenectady or Albany.

After five years of part-time ministry in Glens Falls, I decided it was time to move on—although I wasn’t certain what I was going to do next. As a way of marking time and sorting things out, I served as Interim Minister in Little Falls, an hour west of Schenectady.

Before I left Glens Falls, members of the congregation had been talking about what to do about their building. They had outgrown it, but many people were extremely attached to it. Moving to a new building seemed like a long shot. We had gone to two services, but people hated being separated from each other. After I left, they quickly went back to one service.

As a way to relieve the overcrowding, some had begun to suggest that Glens Falls could spin off a new congregation. People from Saratoga Springs said, “Yes, we’d love a congregation in our hometown.”

I’m not sure at what point I connected with Margaret Beard, the director of New Congregation Ministry at the Unitarian Universalist Association. But as we talked, it became apparent that she was interested in exploring the possibility of establishing a congregation here in Saratoga Springs. She said that the UUA would pay for a demographic study to ascertain whether our city was the kind of place where UU congregations usually do well. We discovered that it was. Margaret suggested I attend New Congregation Ministry Training for ministers for one week in Boston. I did that. She also suggested I look for some people to attend new congregation training for lay leaders. One woman from Saratoga Springs did attend the training, although later, to our disappointment, she decided to return to the Glens Falls congregation.

Lesson number one—*there will be setbacks and disappointments along the way*.

In May 1996 six lay-people and I gathered in the Greenfield Center home of Molly Sargent, a member of the Glens Falls congregation. Living just outside Saratoga Springs, Molly was beginning to find the trip to Glens Falls to be too much to bear. At this first meeting of what would eventually become the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Saratoga Springs, we discussed whether we really could establish a new church in our city.

I was following the model they taught us at New Congregation Training. What stands out in my mind was the instruction to take the time to *form community first*. “People have to come to know, trust, and love each other if it is going to survive for the long haul,” they told us. “Form a steering committee. Offer some adult religious education to explore your mutual spiritual interests and desires before you try to do worship.”

So, we formed a steering committee. Jack and Shelley Carter, Molly Sargent, and Karen Hess were the mainstays. Mally Hennig, who had been a UU elsewhere, quickly found us and joined our group. Ellie Parker also joined, unable to feel at home in the Methodist Church. Ellie’s Jewish background was much more compatible with Unitarian Universalism. Our steering committee met monthly throughout the summer of 1996. By the fall, Shelley said, “I need to do a service. All this meeting isn’t feeding me.”

Another thing they told us at the training was that we needed to get out of private homes and into a public space as soon as possible. People will be reluctant, they said, to come to the home of a stranger. So we moved our meetings to the community room of the Saratoga Springs Visitors’ Center. There, in October 1996, we held our first service in Drink Hall. I photocopied a few hymns, we borrowed a keyboard, and I spoke about why we would want to start a new congregation.

As I recall, approximately twenty people were in attendance. The Order of Service displayed in our Sanctuary bears witness to that special day.

We asked the members of our steering committee to make a financial pledge in order to cover the costs of meeting rooms, publicity, copying, etc. We made plans to publish a monthly newsletter, and we offered the adult religious education curriculum, *A Holy Curiosity*.

Next, as we had been instructed, we planned a public meeting within the next few weeks to inform people in the community that a congregation was forming. We invited Josiah Bartlett to speak to us. Josiah was then the Interim Minister in Albany, but he had been serving the denomination for at least fifty years. We reserved the Community Room at the Saratoga Springs Public Library for a Sunday afternoon. We advertised. We planned refreshments. We arrived at the Community Room an hour before the meeting, and we argued about whether to set up fifteen or twenty chairs. We thought it would be so depressing to have a lot of empty seats. To our amazement, eighty to ninety people attended that first meeting. When Josiah asked how many people had some previous connection with a UU congregation, about half the people raised their hands. We were elated. At last we knew there was a congregation here in Saratoga Springs just waiting to be organized. But, of course, our work had just begun.

Wanderings and Growth

In November 1996 we planned our first service to be an Intergenerational Thanksgiving service and pot luck supper, scheduled for the Sunday before Thanksgiving in the Community Room at the Library. Once again, about ninety people attended.

Immediately after the service, there was a power failure in the Library. So people lit candles and dined by candlelight and the glow from exit and emergency lights. As I looked around at one point, there must have been a dozen babies and toddlers crawling around the floor. But it all seemed very mellow as people talked and laughed and stepped over the babies. Again, success.

At first, we hadn't planned to begin regular services until the following fall. But now we felt we needed to capitalize on the momentum we were building. So, we planned a similar, intergenerational Holiday service for the Sunday before Christmas. We attracted slightly fewer people, but it was still a good-sized group. In January 1997, we decided to start holding regular monthly services at 5 P.M. Sunday evenings. Meeting space in Saratoga Springs was difficult to find, but the Methodists allowed us to use a part of their building on Fifth Avenue. The Methodist minister had a cousin who was studying for the Unitarian Universalist ministry, so he was both curious and supportive. We started a religious education program. Children joined us for the first part of the service, including a story, and then attended religious education classes.

Kristen Burdett, who had grown up as a UU in Birmingham, Michigan, emerged to organize Religious Education. Her friend, Kristie Cartwright, soon joined her as R.E. co-chair. Betty Gallagher offered to play the piano for us. I'd been playing hymns myself and using recorded music for the rest of the service. Being only a marginal pianist, I was grateful to Betty in that I would no longer have to spend two or three hours a week practicing hymns and enduring my nervousness about playing in public. All during that year, I continued serving three-quarter time as Interim Minister in Little Falls, so I often adapted sermons from there.

We met each month at the Methodist church through early June 1997, when we felt we were ready to move on to weekly services. But again, space was a problem. We began a summer recess, not knowing where we would be in the fall. To our delight, the Reformed Jewish congregation took us in, allowing us to use their sanctuary and education wing. The Rabbi's father had been befriended by a Unitarian Congregation in another city when he was trying to start a congregation himself. The Rabbi was delighted to return the favor. So in September, we began holding services every Sunday evening at 5 P.M. at Temple Sinai on Broadway.

UUA encouraged us to ask for support from surrounding congregations. We had held a meeting early in 1997 with the presidents and ministers from Albany, Schenectady, and Glens Falls. Generally, they were supportive. For several months, we funneled our funds through the Glens Falls congregation until we could incorporate and establish our non-profit tax status. Several musical groups from Schenectady and Glens Falls performed in our services. Each neighboring congregation named a liaison to our Steering Committee. Those people then reported back to their congregation's Board of Trustees and occasionally wrote articles about us for their newsletters. All three congregations came together to form a joint choir for our Charter Service in March 1998. Approximately 200 people attended that wonderful service in Temple Sinai, in which all the area UU ministers participated. Fifty-seven people signed our Charter that day.

Behind the scenes, we were working to incorporate under New York State law. We researched by-laws from other UU congregations and wrote a set of our own. We incorporated and established a Board of Trustees. Up to that point I had chaired the Steering Committee. Now, we had officers and an official Board. The president, Jack Carter, chaired the meetings, and I merely attended. It was a heady time. It was a good time.

Soon, we outgrew the sanctuary at the Temple and moved into their community room. It was a good move, but it involved much more work. The room was part of their education wing. Four classrooms had movable walls, which could be pushed back to form one large room. Each week, we had to take down eight tables, set up seventy to eighty chairs, and then reset the room at the end of the coffee hour after the service. It was exhausting work. Early on, we bought

hymnals. Thankfully, we were allowed to store them at the Temple so that we didn't have to carry them in each week. We also bought a beautiful chalice, which we use to this day, with funds donated by Karen Hess. We were very fortunate to be able to store the chalice, hymnals, and religious education and coffee hour supplies in the building.

Our congregational life was good at Temple Sinai, but we began to experience a plateau. We would have from forty to seventy people at worship, but we didn't seem to be growing. In a book on church growth from Alban Institute, I read that most congregations go through such a plateau. Margaret Beard of the UUA encouraged us to look for space which would allow us to hold services on Sunday mornings. Through several people in our congregation affiliated with Skidmore College, we learned that the Skidmore Chapel would soon be available. A new Lutheran congregation had decided not to meet there any longer. We could rent the chapel on Sunday mornings for \$25 per week. However, there would be limited storage, and our children would have to cross a road to get to their classrooms—rooms that were designed for college students rather than young children. Nevertheless, our R.E. teachers felt they could work with it, even though it meant a lot of extra work for them each week.

So we moved to Sunday morning services in the fall of 1999. Wilson Chapel was in a beautiful, secluded, wooded location on the edge of the Skidmore campus. Large windows brought the beauty of nature into our worship services. The chapel's grand piano, ably played by Betty Gallagher, provided full-bodied support for our congregational singing. Other musicians and vocalists soon joined our congregation and inspired us in song with piano, guitar, and recorder. We also had a children's choir during those years, which added a great deal to our intergenerational services.

Together we experienced many beautiful services in Wilson Chapel, mornings when we felt that the space just glowed, when we felt we were in the midst of something very loving, very special. Among many other highlights was the circle story, *When Brian Hugged His Mother*; heartfelt Valentine's Day services that expanded our definition and experience of love and acceptance; the renewal of wedding vows in a particularly joyful and moving service; our memorial service for Mally Hennig, one of our charter members; and the Sunday after 9/11, when we came together as one family in need of healing and understanding.

Another highlight, important to many, was the playground of Skidmore's Early Childhood Education Center, located adjacent to the building where our R.E. classes were held. Many young couples would gather there after services while their children played. It was a great community builder for young families, something we wanted to keep in mind for future locations.

Our move to Sunday morning services did indeed result in growth and a real sense of momentum. By the end of our

second year at the Chapel, we often had standing-room only in a building that seated eighty. We were beginning to wonder—where do we go from here?

A Home of Our Own

In the spring of 2001, Skidmore told us there were two Sundays in May and June when we wouldn't be able to use Wilson Chapel. So we needed to look for other space or cancel our services for those mornings. We were reluctant to cancel because (1) we knew we might lose track of any new people who expected us to be there, and (2) there were always a few regular members who missed the news about changes in our schedule. We were aware that approximately one mile away on North Broadway there was a vacant building previously owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses. It had been purchased by the director of the funeral home next door in the hopes of expanding his building onto the parking lot of his new property. We wondered about the possibility of renting the building from him, since we didn't think we would be able to afford to buy anything. Our Finance Committee had done some projections and thought that just maybe we'd be able to buy our own facility in 2010. So we approached the owner about renting the building on a trial basis for the last Sunday in May and the first Sunday in June, before we thought about renting it on a more permanent basis.

Meanwhile, my husband, a commercial realtor, encouraged us to meet with an acquaintance of his in Saratoga Springs who specialized in structuring deals in which companies unload excess real estate by giving it to non-profit institutions and taking the tax deduction. I arranged for a lunch with Ron and myself and two people from our building committee, Jim Mihuta and Betty Gallagher. We first met at the building so that Ron could see it. He said, "Buy it. It's undervalued for the street." We didn't know if such a thing would be at all possible for our small congregation, given that we had just \$28 in our building fund at the time. But with a leap of faith, we carried the word back to our Finance Committee, Building Committee, and Board of Trustees.

Suddenly, magic began to happen. Several people came forward to serve on a Building and Capital Campaign committee. A proposal was put together. An appeal was made to members and friends to give or loan us the money that would allow us to buy the building. Meanwhile, the plans of the funeral home had changed, and the director, Mark Phillips, now wanted to sell the building. He liked the idea that it would continue to be used as a church. And since parking was an issue for the funeral home, such an arrangement would allow them to share in the use of the parking lot. He was willing to help finance the building for us.

Amazingly, over the summer, we raised \$80,000 in donations and an additional \$150,000 in loans from our members and friends. Mark Phillips graciously financed the

rest. We bought the building for \$320,000 and moved in during November 2001. Prior to the move, we renovated the downstairs restroom and eliminated the separate ladies' room so that we could provide a nursery for our youngest children. We bought 200 chairs for the Sanctuary and an additional 50 hymnals. We gratefully accepted the loan of the pulpit of one of my mentors. We were given a piano by a member of the Schenectady church and an organ from a friend of one of our own members. We held our first service in our building on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, just five years after that first service at the Library. We'd come a long way.

Over the winter, we experienced the joys and sorrows of home ownership—things like snow plowing, furnace maintenance, and an electrical system that tended to get overloaded when we plugged in the coffee makers on Sunday mornings. A Chalice Lighter grant from the St. Lawrence District allowed us to furnish our children's Religious Education space with tables, chairs, bookshelves, and white boards. Finally, in April 2002, we dedicated our building in a wonderful service. A brass quintet provided the music, and Margaret Beard, director of new congregations at UUA, delivered the sermon. Jack Carter told the history of the congregation, and Molly Sargent, one of our founding members, presented the keys of the building to our president, Hunter Currin.

Another milestone of 2002 was when the congregation called me as their settled minister. I had originally been appointed by Margaret Beard to serve as the organizing minister. Because Unitarian Universalists have congregational polity—the idea that each congregation is self-governing and calls its own ministers—we went through some soul searching, the congregation and myself, to decide whether I should continue on after the initial five-year appointment had ended. On June 2, the congregation voted unanimously to call me as settled minister, and I voted unanimously to stay!

Once in our own space, our programming really took off. Our Social Justice Committee reorganized in January 2002, and then, quite quickly, we had a book group, circle suppers, a goods and services auction, a monthly coffee house, small group ministries, and several offerings in Adult Religious Education. In June, we had the first graduation for our Coming of Age youth. Another rite of passage was my first ministerial sabbatical in 2004. I was away for four months, and the congregation learned how to run the church on its own. A sabbatical committee, ably chaired by Arliss Nygard and Murray Penney, oversaw the sabbatical, and the Worship Committee went into high gear to provide guest or lay speakers every week. Later that fall, Kimberley Debus moved here from North Carolina and organized a choir. Around that same time, Diana O'Brien organized a group of quilters to work on a large quilt which would hang on the back wall of the chancel. As 2004 came to a close, we held our first holiday party in our own building, because by then our revelries had outgrown the homes of individual members.

In May 2005, we dedicated the quilt in memory of Sara Rawitsch, a church member who had designed and constructed much of the center section of the quilt but who had passed away at the end of December. In June, Kimberley Debus directed a church and community production of the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It was a great success, with three sold-out performances and some folks turned away at the door. Also that spring, Bill Carberg and Richard Trewin designed and built a beautiful pulpit, with a flaming chalice carved on the front, and two plinths to hold the chalice and singing bowl. The pulpit, along with three custom-built cabinets at the back of the Sanctuary, were dedicated in July. Behind the scenes, Peter Rawitsch and then Alan Bartenhagen worked to improve our sound system, loaning us some of the equipment we use to this day.

In the fall, we began to feel that our Sunday mornings in the Sanctuary were becoming overcrowded, especially with our after-service coffee hour being held in the same space. The room comfortably seats 120, but on many Sundays we had more than 120 adults and children in attendance. So in February 2006, after a few months of deliberation and planning, we began to hold two services, at 9 and 11 A.M. Although our Religious Education classes were offered at only the later service, we hoped to be able to offer it to our children at both services as we continued to grow.

Another highlight that spring was the completion and dedication of the playground behind the church. It is something that we had longed for and planned since our days at Wilson Chapel, when children and parents lingered on the adjacent playground after services. It was wonderful to know that we finally had a special place for our children, not only in our hearts, but here on our grounds as well.

We knew that as we made the transition to two services, we could not continue to expect our programs to thrive with only volunteer staff. As we embarked together on the next part of our journey as a congregation, with growth came change.

Reaching Out, Reaching Within

From the very beginning, our congregation has been a very active one. In the early days, whenever someone came to me with an idea for a program or an activity, I cheered them on, so grateful to have energy and ideas, creativity and leadership. But as we grew, I began to realize that getting on our horses and riding off in all directions might not be quite what we needed as a congregation. Were we certain that all the activities and programs really fit in with our mission? And who should decide which new programs should be undertaken? I began to wonder whether we were trying to do too many things at once, and I longed for some vertical integration of our programs.

Research has shown that when a congregation surpasses 150 in attendance at worship, the organization is too large for the minister to be involved in every aspect of the church. As

a relatively young congregation in 2006, we suddenly found ourselves in a transitional zone, moving from a Pastoral congregational model to a Program model, in which the minister is pastor to a leadership team and the leaders carry out the programs of the congregation. The organizational chart of a Program church has more verticality, with programs and committees grouped into related areas. We are still in the midst of this transition, at times a difficult process indeed, but we continue to make steady progress.

When we made the transition to two services in February 2006, we knew we could not continue to expect our programs to thrive under the volunteer model of the past. Betty Gallagher had served us faithfully as a volunteer church pianist for nine years, and it was simply too much to expect her to continue to do that for two services and a choir rehearsal each week. So that month Betsy Lehmann joined our staff as our church pianist. In the following years, Betsy was succeeded in turn by Zöe Coppola, Ashley Prickel, and Irene Gilb.

In the spring of 2007, Kimberley Debus, our volunteer choir director, was suffering with a serious back injury, so Betsy Lehman took over as choir director until Ashley Prickel was hired for that position in November. When Ashley left the area to study abroad, Don Kerr was hired as choir director in September 2008. Don served in that position until the following January. Our music program took a giant leap towards stability when we hired Michael Harrison as our first music director in September 2009. Our choir and our overall music program are thriving and expanding under Michael's leadership and inspiration.

After many years of having a volunteer director of Religious Education, we were able to hire a part-time RE Director when Dari Brennan joined our staff in October 2006. Merle O'Connor succeeded Dari in this important position in January 2008. Jennifer Pratt became our current RE Director in January 2009. Our religious education program continues to prosper and grow under her direction.

For many years volunteers had done much of the work in the church office. In April 2007 we hired Sharon MacFarlane as our first part-time office administrator. Sharon was succeeded by Sue Jefts, Suji Sundar, Peggy Metz, and, in August 2009, by Lori Friedman, our present office administrator.

Yet another important member of the staff is our nursery attendant. This position has been filled over the years by Molly Tozier, Amy Sicker, Helen Thompson, Genesen May, and Gwen Pickard.

As we slowly added additional staff positions to support the work of our congregation, members and friends continued to bring energetic and creative projects to our common table. Ann Hebert and others particularly interested in the environment formed the Green Sanctuary Committee and began efforts to become certified by the UUA as a Green Sanctuary. Lin Hare organized a women's hikers and paddlers group. Peter Marino

and the Social Justice Committee studied the death penalty and sponsored several speakers on the subject. The committee also set up a system by which the congregation donates half of its Sunday offerings each month to a non-profit human services organization in the local community. Eric Lawson led an effort to establish a process for resolving conflicts in the congregation. Our annual goods and services auction continues to be one of the fundraising and social highlights of the year. Dan Berggren was often in the forefront of organizing concerts of acoustic music in the Sanctuary for the benefit of the church. With the help of several others who laid the groundwork, Bill Carberg designed and built our Wayside Pulpit to enable us to share our message with all those who pass by our door.

We began to struggle even more with the issue of space, debating whether we should rebuild on this site, buy land and build a new building of our dreams, or try to rehab an older building in town. Under the guidance of the Long-Range Planning Committee, we began to explore all three options. Early in the process an architect told us we couldn't build on site because of zoning regulations. We then began to explore various options for building a new church on vacant land close to town. Such an option turned out to be much too expensive, so we looked at the possibility of sharing space at the First Baptist Church on Washington Street. After a great deal of planning and negotiation, we held a trial service at the historic church in October 2007. Reviews were mixed. Some loved the old building because it reminded them of the church of their childhood. Some hated it for the same reason. Many were apprehensive about the cost of renovating such an old and historic building and whether it would take too much of our energy to be constantly negotiating with another congregation with views so different from our own.

In 2008 the chair of the city's Design Review Commission encouraged us to take another look at building on site. He thought we could get the variances we would need under the city's zoning ordinances. In 2009 a local architectural firm drew up very preliminary and conceptual plans for a new building. The plans were unveiled at the stewardship reception in October. An important milestone had been passed. We now believed it was possible to rebuild on this site. We continued to explore both options so that we could compare the costs of building anew on North Broadway vs. rehabilitating and sharing the First Baptist Church.

Around the time of our service at First Baptist, we undertook some work in our present building to improve its aesthetics and functionality and to make the best use of the space we had. Linda Wilkes led the effort to upgrade our office communications systems and completely redesigned our website, which could now present Sunday sermons online both as text and audio. Alan Bartenhagen organized a crew who painted the basement office, hallway, classroom, and nursery, and completed a long-overdue renovation of the downstairs bathroom. Carter Yepsen led a group who donated time and

funds to paint the exterior of the building, yet another project that had been long overdue.

In the spring and summer of 2008, Linda Wilkes and many others laid the groundwork for the first of two church fairs that were held in the parking lot and within the church itself in August 2008 and 2009. These events were particularly helpful in raising some much-needed revenue for the congregation as well as in spreading the word about the church throughout the local area.

In January 2009 the congregation gave me the gift of my second sabbatical, this time for six months, during which I was able to rest, write, and travel to ancient sacred sites in Rome, Turkey, and Greece. As it did during my first sabbatical in 2004, the congregation successfully ran the church on its own. Richard Wilkinson chaired a sabbatical committee that helped keep the home fires burning, and the Worship Committee ably provided guest or lay speakers for two services each week.

In response to a long-standing desire to bring the membership of the four regional UU congregations together in common spirit, CRUUNY, the Capital Region Unitarian Universalists of New York, held a joint service at the Saratoga Hilton in April 2009, attended by more than 500 people. We were honored and delighted to be the host congregation. The enthusiasm that sprang from that wonderful Sunday morning led the group to design an ongoing marketing campaign to spread the word about Unitarian Universalism throughout the region. A second joint service is planned for June 2010.

Isn't it amazing—just thirteen years ago there was no Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Saratoga Springs. Wherever we decide to be in the future, let us ever strive to continue to be a blessing to each other, to our community, and to our world.

Rev. Linda Hoddy
January 2010