

## **A Very Brief History of All Souls Church**

(This was presented by Mara Cherkasky, of the All Souls Archives Committee, when the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee met for dinner at All Souls on April 13, 2018.)

Washington, the new capital city, was less than two decades old when a group of prominent men started meeting to discuss forming a liberal church. On November 11, 1821, they formally organized the First Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.

Founding members included Architect of the Capitol Charles Bulfinch; Secretary of State John Quincy Adams (later President, 1825-1829); Secretary of War John C. Calhoun (later Vice President, 1825-1829); and two future mayors of Washington.

Bulfinch was asked to design a building for the corner of Sixth and D Streets, NW, a block from City Hall. The church was dedicated in 1822.

Paul Revere's son Joseph cast the church's bell in his Canton, Massachusetts, foundry. President James Monroe had donated \$100 toward the bell, which was used not only for the church but also to announce public emergencies and momentous occasions. We're proud that that bell hangs in our steeple today.

We're also proud of our social justice history — and I'm going to focus on that today. It has sometimes has taken a rather crooked path.

During its first fifty years the church struggled financially and went through a lot of different ministers. Some left because they couldn't live on the salary and others because their abolitionist views didn't line up with half the congregation's — which reflected Washington's population, half northern and half south. One minister who lasted six years was Rev. Stephen Greenleaf Bulfinch, the son of Charles Bulfinch, the founder & architect. Early in his tenure, Rev. Bulfinch agreed to allow Quaker abolitionist Lucretia Mott (the most famous woman of her time) to speak at the church — to an overflow crowd that included many Congressmen from both the North and the South. Bulfinch survived.

One who didn't was Rev. Moncure Conway, who served from 1854 to 1856, when he was in his early 20s. He was mostly able to stay quiet about his abolitionist views but, on two occasions, was not. In the second of his sermons about slavery, he advocated for the secession of the South, as a lesser evil than war. After he finished preaching, he expected the choir to sing, but instead there was a stunned silence. Shortly thereafter, Conway was dismissed.

A few years later, First Unitarian's minister was Rev. William Haley, who believed Christianity should serve the oppressed. On December 2, 1859, the church's bell tolled continuously to memorialize the hanging of abolitionist John Brown for leading a raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. This did not sit well with Washington's mayor and city council. They ordered the discontinuance of all further public use of the bell.

During the Civil War Rev. William Ellery Channing offered up the church for use as a military hospital. In exchange, the congregation was allowed to meet in the U.S. Senate chambers on Sundays.

This wartime use took a toll on the building, and the congregation decided to move. Getting a new church took quite a while, though. The first pot of money raised by the congregation ending up being sent to Chicago after the Great Fire (1871). Finally, in 1877, the congregation laid the cornerstone at 14<sup>th</sup> and L streets NW — and also voted to change its name to All Souls Church, Unitarian. The first services in the new building took place in January 1878.

The congregation grew after its move to 14<sup>th</sup> and L, and then even more under Rev. Ulysses Pierce, who was called in 1901. So All Souls built a third church — the one we're in now — and held its first service here in June 1923. The sanctuary wasn't complete, so the service took place in this very room, later named Pierce Hall.

Rev. A. Powell Davies arrived in 1944 and quickly won a national reputation as a forceful advocate for civil rights, women's rights, nuclear disarmament, and numerous other causes. Thanks to Davies' activism, All Souls cemented its role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a leader in social justice.

Close to home, Davies welcomed people of all races and creeds to All Souls, and our church became one of the few places in Washington where mixed-race groups could meet. He led a campaign against DC restaurants that held to a whites-only policy. In the mid-1950s the church asked the organizers of Police Boys Club No. 10, which had been meeting here since 1937, to drop its whites-only policy — but the club refused and moved out. To take its place, All Souls organized the Columbia Heights Boys Club, Washington's first integrated youth group. It later admitted girls, too. Under Davies the church organized food & clothing drives for the needy in Europe after WWII and oversaw the effort by All Souls children to send school & art supplies to children in a school in Hiroshima. The Japanese children sent back drawings — which are still being exhibited here and all over. Some of the drawings hang in a hallway on the lower level of the church, if you want to take a look. The story of the drawings — and the continuing relationship between All Souls and Hiroshima — has been documented in a film.

Under Rev. Duncan Howlett, who succeeded Rev. Davies starting in 1958, All Souls established a birth control clinic in the building, initiated an anti-poverty program in the neighborhood, participated in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and helped feed participants in the 1968 Poor People's March. The church gained more African American members, as well as officers and staff.

In 1959 Rev. Howlett hired James Reeb as associate minister. Five years later Rev. Reeb resigned to work full time in the Civil Rights Movement, but in 1965 he was killed by segregationists in Selma, Alabama. When Rev. Howlett left in 1968, he recommended that the next senior minister be African American.

That man was Rev. David Eaton, who became the first African American senior minister in the UUA. He arrived in 1969 just after the civil disturbances that had devastated much of the

surrounding neighborhood. At a time when many DC churches were following their white congregants to the suburbs, All Souls remained in the city. Rev. Eaton was soon preaching to a congregation that was half African American and half white.

He made waves. He had a regular radio show, and then a TV show, bringing people's attentions to all sorts of pressing issues. Early in his tenure, Rev. Eaton denounced from the pulpit Pres. Nixon's DC Crime Bill, which would have allowed preventive detention, wire-tapping, and no-knock searches of private homes. Remember, DC did not have home rule at the time. Anyway, he said: "I suggest to you that, because of the oppression that is growing in this country, any time a person breaks into your home without a warrant, shoot him!" This was too much for some All Souls members, and some quit -- but the provision did get removed from the legislation.

During Eaton's tenure, the church served breakfast to homeless individuals and housed Vietnam War protesters from out of town. Black Panthers Angela Davis and Bobby Seale, and Rev. Ben Chavis of the Wilmington Ten, among other controversial figures, spoke from the pulpit.

Another achievement of this period: the All Souls Housing Corp was formed and worked with a nonprofit to build hundreds of units of subsidized housing in the devastated riot corridor – just a block from the church.

Besides ministering to All Souls, David Eaton served on various local and national commissions. He was elected to three terms on the DC School Board, and was chosen president of the board by his colleagues due to his special talent as a mediator.

More recently, under Rev. Rob Hardies, Mayor Adrian Fenty signed the DC Marriage Equality Act at All Souls, in recognition of the role Rev. Hardies and church members played in pushing the law to passage. All Souls Housing has ensured that the housing units built in the 1970s remain accessible to low-income people. The congregation continues to have its hands in any number of other causes, including the Reeb Voting Rights Project, climate change, and racial justice.

A few weeks ago, we served breakfast to a busload of high school students from Florida who were arriving to participate in the March for Our Lives. And our work continues as we approach our third century.