MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

THE FELLOWSHIP MOVEMENT AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: GROWING UNIVERSALISM AND UNITARIANISM IN 20TH CENTURY LAKELAND, FLORIDA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the history of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida as a women's history. It is argued that sexism prevented generative action to grow the faith in the 1920s. The fellowship movement in the 1950s provided a paradigm shift for how to do church. This case study examines the importance of the fellowship strategy in supporting growth and strengthening women's leadership to the point that a congregation could be sustained. This thesis makes the claim that the fellowship movement played a significant role in flattening the gender hierarchy, allowing for Unitarian Universalism to flourish in Lakeland. The fellowship movement was a successful growth strategy because of the presence of women. This study of women's history in one congregation hopes to contribute to our understanding of our Unitarian Universalist religious history.

To my daughter, Alexandria Mae Curry, whose beautiful mind and loving heart carries onward the tradition of our Unitarian Universalist faith.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUA: American Unitarian Association

BAC: Black Affairs Council

FFWC: Florida Federation of Women's Clubs

FSC: Florida Southern College

LRUF: Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship (UUCL's original name)

LRUUF: Lake Region Unitarian Universalist Fellowship (UUCL's name after the 1961 merger)

UGC: Universalist General Convention

UN: United Nations

UU: Unitarian Universalism/Unitarian Universalist

UUA: Unitarian Universalist Association

UUCL: Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland

WNMAUC: Women's National Missionary Association of The Universalist Church

WUMA: Women's Universalist Missionary Association

YPCU: Young People's Christian Union

INTRODUCTION:

THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF LAKELAND AND THE TELLING OF HISTORY

Three themes resonate in the stories of the longtime members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida (UUCL): pride, joy, and conflict. They remember the physical labor that they invested in the congregation's buildings and grounds. They recall festive picnics and pool parties. Members tell stories about their social action and longtime commitment to marching in the city's Martin Luther King, Jr. parade, and assisting people experiencing homelessness. In the sanctuary, social hall, and kitchen hang plaques with fellowship members' names, honoring their contributions, especially for those active in social justice work. The congregation created the "Tommie Award" to honor the social justice work of individuals and awarded it to many people outside of the congregation, too.[1] The congregation values their children. The people of UUCL recall youth conferences, worship services created by the Religious Education program, and even "reindeer corrals," built by one of the long-time members each year with large branches and sticks as a magical space for the children to imagine preparing a special place for Santa to rest his reindeer on Christmas Eve. The congregation also remembers the hard times, the disagreements, the pain that stung them, and the lost friends and members through death, moving, as well as conflict. Most of the ministers who served the congregation have portraits hanging on the wall in the social hall. The ministers' picture gallery stirs up both joyful and painful memories.[2] Most of the memories focus on the congregation's

[1] Some past recipients include: The Neighborhood Service Center, 1972; Polk County Spouse Abuse, 1979; S.P.C.A. of Lakeland, 1980; Planned Parenthood of Central Florida, 1981; Polk AIDS Support Service, 1989; Polk County Citizens for Peace and Justice, 1991.

[2] As happens in many congregations, and especially those that were previously fellowships, there was conflict between the lay leaders and a few of the ministers.

start as a small Unitarian community born out of the American Unitarian Association's mid-twentieth century growth program, the fellowship movement.

All these stories are important. Ethicist Walter Fluker argues that the significance of remembering is not merely an intellectual exercise but also "associated with deep emotional energy, which is spiritual and emphatic."[3] In other words, what we remember emphasizes what is most meaningful to us as we retell our stories. The meaning in our stories contributes to how we build our character, identity, and ethical and spiritual natures. As a small church, stories are essential to integrating new members into the folds of who the congregation is and has been. The stories anchor us in tradition and help us orient ourselves toward the institution's future with well-grounded ethical and spiritual natures. To behave in accordance with our ethical and spiritual natures, we ask questions about who we are: who are we in relationship to ourselves, to others, and to the ultimate mystery? What is ours to do? The stories of our tradition help us answer these questions and form a collective understanding of our identity. It is important, then, that the stories we are telling are accurate and meaningfully convey our values, serving as a spiritual compass.

In addition to oral and pictorial histories, several written histories of Lakeland Unitarian Universalism attempt to capture the history of the congregation. The most popular written record is in a thin, green folder labeled "UUCL History 1952 - 1994."[4] Passed from leader to leader, the green folder orients new leaders with stories from the congregation's past. Leaders keep the folder safe and ready to pass along to the next generation of congregational leadership. The green folder sits on my table, next to my computer as I write, along with a stack of papers and books. Within the green folder are two historical accounts of the Lakeland congregation.

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[3] Walter Earl Fluker, *Ethical Leadership* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 168.

[4] Copies of these histories can also be found in the Lakeland Public Library Archives.

Cleo "Tommie" Thomas compiled the first history. She took meticulous notes and archived several boxes of letters, newspaper articles, and pictures during her time as a member and lay leader in the fellowship in the 1960s through the 1970s.[5] She chronicled the events of the growing fellowship and included the names of the lay members who contributed their time, talent, and treasures. Tommie's history focuses heavily on her leadership for the congregation's search for property in 1960. Until then, the fellowship rented space for their Sunday services and activities. She wrote about the congregation's purchase of the Troy Avenue building and the subsequent expansion of the buildings on that property because the fellowship continued to grow. Tommie explained how a do-it-yourself culture, where members worked from dawn to dark to refurbish the buildings and create a "quiet, restful place," helped fuel joy and gratitude in the community.[6]

The second congregational history in the green folder was written by two lay leaders in the 1990s–Joyce Bode and Perry Newport. It summarizes Tommie's version, picks up where she left off, and focuses on the lay leaders who contributed throughout the years until 1995. This historical account lists the ministers who served the congregation, starting in the early 1970s, how they were admired, and also how the first female minister, Rev. Emily Morse Palmer, was badly treated and forced to resign. Also included is a list of the first thirty-five members (see Appendix), all the board presidents, and recipients of the Tommie Award, an award of social work in the community. Throughout their account, the authors lift up the names of lay leaders and the contributions they made to the fellowship. This extensive list of lay people who left their mark on this congregation and with whose legacy the congregation still interacts with, has helped

[5] Cleo Thomas, "History of: Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship, Inc." in the UUCL Green Folder, May 1975.

[6] Cleo Thomas, "History of: Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship, Inc." in the UUCL Green Folder, May 1975.

relay to more recent leadership the context in which they serve. To read the long list of names, leaves one knowing that they are a part of a bigger vision for a Unitarian Universalist church, one that offers a spiritual home and a path for living one's best ethical and spiritual life. It is a vision that has been carried by many over the years.

The Lakeland's Public Library archives also house several boxes of archival material from the fellowship, which longtime member Keyno Hicks shared with me in conversation. Inside a box in these archives is another historical account of the Lakeland fellowship. It was written by Hal Hubener, a former supervisor of special collections at the Lakeland Public Library and a fellowship member in the 1990s.[7] The "green folder" historical narrative references Hubener's account. At least one other current congregation member has read it and this member mentioned that a man named Dr. Hardin tried to start a Universalist church in Lakeland in the 1920s. However, the story was inaccurate. While I appreciate the good-hearted effort that Hubener put into his work, his account relies on the unspoken assumption that men were the primary contributors of leadership and labor to the local movement. The result of this perspective is an incomplete history of the Lakeland congregation. Anyone in the fellowship who had read this report would have an incomplete understanding of the congregation's history. Hubener's narrative fails to fully attribute the work of women to the initiatives to build a Universalist church in Lakeland. While Hubener's history mentions two Universalist women lay leaders in the 1920s, Bertha Steitz and Flora Gentry, men play the lead roles in his version of history. But Steitz and Gentry deserve more than a passing mention in the history of the congregation. They were the main instigators in leading multiple attempts to start a liberal church in Lakeland. Instead, Hubener offers biographical details about Dr. Hardin, suggesting he had a primary role

[7] The green folder account by Bode and Newport mentioned Hubener joined in 1992.

in starting the congregation.[8] While archival documents show that Hardin supported the efforts of Universalists, Steitz and Gentry, there is no evidence that Hardin played a primary role in the start of the congregation. Further marginalizing women's work in the congregation, Hubener's history centralizes and lists the names of the men who agreed or were appointed to chair the board of the embryonic Universalist Unitarian society. In most cases, however, these men were ineffective in their roles or abandoned them. The work to keep the nascent congregation together was led by Steitz and Gentry.

Hubener's history extends to the 1950s and covers the early years of Lakeland's development of a fellowship. Throughout his account, Hubener perpetuates the idea that men were primarily responsible for forming and leading the fellowship. For a list of board officers, he provided information on the men's careers. For the women on the list, he indicated who they were married to and their husbands' careers, as if they, too, did not have various jobs and responsibilities of their own outside of church. Additionally, Hubener wrote about the failed 1952 attempt to start a Lakeland fellowship and compared it to the failure of the 1920s Universalist endeavor. By comparing them, he concluded that the same difficulties seemed present in 1953 as in 1928: lack of leadership, commitment, and sufficient interested parties. The archival records do not support his interpretation of the 1920s efforts and only partially tells the story of the short-lived 1953 fellowship. Recognizing that Hubener did not have access to all the information that is currently available, it is acknowledged here that important clues to Lakeland's early history were inaccessible to him and he could not have drawn the same conclusions as this thesis. However, he did have access to the letters between Steitz, Gentry, and the associations that clearly illustrate the women's leadership, making it apparent that a normative androcentric

[8] Hal Hubener, "A Chronology of Unitarian/Universalists in Lakeland, 1884-1955," undated, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 34, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

perspective was the lens through which Hubener interpreted the history of Universalism and Unitarianism in Lakeland.

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Historian Ann Braude argues in her ground-breaking essay that "women's history is American religious history." One of American religious groups' "most consistent features" is that "women constitute the majority of participants" in religious organizations.[9] Braude urges us to study religious history from an understanding that women were present, not that men were absent.[10] An examination of Lakeland's Universalist history reveals the engaged and committed leadership of women in establishing a congregation. Institutional sexism and traditional patriarchal hierarchies at the national Universalist and Unitarian associations thwarted the women's efforts to successfully build a church.

It is dangerous not to reflect on the errors of the past. As Fluker writes, remembering "is a vital dimension of the transformation of consciousness."[11] The diminishment of women's leadership is a part of Lakeland's history that needs revisiting. The ethical and spiritual nature of the congregation depends on a truthful retelling. The stories we tell to understand our history must include the lay women who brought our religious institutions to life. A complete, and not a dismembered, picture of the people and their relationships that contributed to our present moments in religious communities must include women if we are serious about breaking the old patterns of sexism and the disenfranchisement of women.[12] How else do we transform the

[9] Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1997), 88.

[10] Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," 87.

[11] Fluker, *Ethical Leadership*, 168.

[12] Fluker tells the Egyptian story of Isis and Osiris in *Ethical Leadership* that defines "dismembered": when Isis finally finds each part of Osiris's *dismembered* body, she *remembers* him (see: Fluker, *Ethical Leadership,* 168). While doing the work of this thesis, I have uncovered parts of a dismembered body of knowledge that will help us remember our history and transform our collective consciousness.

collective consciousness into a meaningful whole? Recognizing the work of women fills in the gaps in our knowledge about how and why congregations exist and what sort of leadership brought them into being. Again, Fluker urges us to reclaim "bodies of disparate and disconnected meaning" so that our ethical and spiritual characters are ones of integrity.[13]

This thesis examines the development and history of what is now the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland. What began as a case study of the fellowship movement in Central Florida has since revealed a strong and compelling historical narrative about women's work in the church that began long before the efforts to start a fellowship in the 1950s. Through an extensive study of denominational and congregational records, letters, and newspaper and periodical articles, I have reconstructed the history of UUCL with a focus on lay and predominantly white women's leadership in the start of a liberal church.[14] This thesis retells the history of Lakeland religious liberals as a women's history because it was the leadership of women that initiated and grew Universalism and Unitarianism in Lakeland. As Ann Braude contends, "where women are present, religion flourishes, where they are absent, it does not."[15]

This thesis argues that sexism obstructed generative action of women to grow the faith in the 1920s because the leaders of the local organization were dependent on the actions of men at the association level. The fellowship movement in the 1950s offered an alternative approach for how to do church by placing the power to form a congregation in the hands of the lay leaders. This case study examines the importance of the fellowship strategy in supporting growth and

[13] Fluker, *Ethical Leadership*, 168.

[14] Although the majority of women I researched for this thesis identified as white, I do not have adequate information to exclude the possibility of the involvement of Black, Indigenous, or Women of Color in the growth of Unitarian Universalism in Lakeland.

[15] Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1997), 88.

strengthening women's leadership to the point that they could sustain a congregation even amid midcentury American sexist attitudes and ideas of the gendered division of labor, as well as in the minds of the members of the fellowship. This thesis claims that the fellowship movement played a significant role in flattening the gender hierarchy, allowing for Unitarian Universalism to flourish in Lakeland because the leadership and vision of women were allowed to surface and were perceived as valuable. It begs the question, was the fellowship movement a successful growth strategy because of the presence of women? This study of women's history in one congregation hopes to contribute to our understanding of our Unitarian Universalist religious history and the fellowship movement.

This thesis begins with a literature review that highlights previous written histories of the fellowship movement and fellowship congregations. This review will demonstrate that prior research has not yet included a deep analysis of the role of women in the fellowship movement and the subsequent growth of Unitarian Universalism. The aim of this thesis is to provide a case study that begins to fill this gap and prompt questions for further research about the role of women in the fellowship movement in other areas across the country. After providing a short history of the Lakeland area for context, this paper is divided into two parts: the history of the 1920s Lakeland Universalists and the history of the 1950s Lakeland Unitarian fellowship movement. Important parallels will be drawn between the two efforts that highlight the nature of women's leadership in both movements so that the conclusion becomes clear: the fellowship movement empowered women's leadership and visions to grow a liberal church.

Literature Review

Two major works study the fellowship movement on a national level. First, *Bright Galaxy: Ten Years of Unitarian Fellowships*, published by Laile E. Bartlett in 1960, is a "comprehensive view of the fellowship setting and problems."[16] Bartlett, a sociologist and wife of a Unitarian minister and seminary president, had visited fellowships across the country and conducted interviews with members, as well as administrators at the association level. She had worked with archival materials to uncover the movement's early history. She had examined the correspondence between members and the AUA's Fellowship Office. In *Bright Galaxy*, Bartlett researches how fellowships were organized and developed and were defined by those who lived "the fellowship experience," and by ministers and AUA officials. Bartlett explores the unique cultural aspects that developed in some fellowships and the influence these had on the overall cultural patterns that developed within the larger context of Unitarianism, and examines how the larger movement's theology and structure influenced the fellowships.

Bartlett names the original goal of the AUA's fellowship program as "providing the scattered and isolated liberals throughout the land with an opportunity to participate in liberal religion."[17] The goal of the fellowship movement was to support and encourage lay leaders to start a fellowship that would eventually grow into a church that could call a minister. Her statistical research reveals that the fellowship plan reached twelve and a half thousand people in the first ten years of the movement, the majority new to Unitarianism. Ten years into the program, two hundred and forty-nine fellowships were in operation. Twenty-nine new Unitarian

[16] Laile E. Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), xiii.
[17] Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, 143.

churches had developed out of fellowships. The fellowship movement proved to be a viable plan for church extension.[18] The fellowship congregations had staying power.

But Bartlett, after her extensive study of fellowships and the people involved in them, does not conclude that the purpose of fellowships was merely to grow a church. While some would likely take that trajectory, Bartlett argues that fellowships were something special that could exist for their own sake. She offers that the "problems" for the fellowships were their lack of knowledge about the fundamentals of organizing a group. They needed training, leadership development, religious education support, and knowledge about their Unitarian historical roots. Bartlett advocates against supporting them with a "model drawn from church patterns" but rather something "afresh with the fellowship in mind."[19] She insists they did not need a minister to "take them over." Instead, she advocates for the continuation of the Fellowship Office at the AUA to provide more staff and funding to the fellowships. She hopes that proper support will undergird fellowship development and organization, assisting them in nurturing more solid identities and purpose.

Bartlett's work offers an optimistic lens through which to view the fellowship movement. "There will always, we hope, be the gaily-bright new fellowship stars, alight with the freshness of discovery and the wonder of for-the-first-time experience."[20] She perceives fellowships as an accidental answer to some of the present-day problems. With their lack of clerical hierarchies, fellowships provided a place where one could find meaning through creating, rather than receiving, spiritual experiences. The smaller size of fellowships offered an individual a community in which they could be intimately known and appreciated for who they were.

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[18] Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, 144.
[19] Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, 156.
[20] Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, 161.

Formulation of one's own religious approach, by use of one's own intellect, happens "against the backdrop of other brains" in a "warm and meaningful small group."[21] Bartlett's work captures the excitement that existed through many of the Unitarian fellowships during the first ten years of their existence. It is a reminder that, before divisive problems emerged and sour attitudes developed towards fellowships, there was a high level of enthusiasm from these mostly new-to-Unitarianism people that helped shape the growth of this faith during the mid-twentieth century.

The second major work, *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy* was published in 2008 by Holley Ulbrich. Writing sixty years after the start of the AUA's fellowship movement, Ulbrich provides a critical assessment of fellowship culture as it developed throughout the decades and its impact on the growth of Unitarian Universalism. Although the AUA Fellowship Office closed in 1967 when Munroe Husbands, the first and only director of the AUA's Fellowship Office, retired, fellowship movement congregations outlived the Fellowship Office and continued to develop without its support.[22]

Like Bartlett, Ulbrich had traveled around the country visiting existing fellowships, conducted interviews with those involved with the groups and the movement, and used archival materials to support her thesis that this "large-scale experiment in church growth" was both "unique" and "controversial."[23] Ulbrich highlights the positive aspects of fellowship culture and its influences on Unitarian Universalism at large, and also explores the challenges of fellowship movement congregations and the ways that have caused conflict and damaged relationships.

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[21] Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy*, 162.

[22] Ulbrich does explain that not every fellowship survived. She provides data by region for how many did and did not.

[23] Holley H. Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), vii.

After analyzing the movement, Ulbrich reviews fellowships by region and provides rich statistical data, including how many fellowships were started, how many survived, time periods of their founding, and membership numbers. In Ulbrich's account of the Southeastern region of the United States, she qualifies Florida as an anomaly. As she explains, "any regional division is somewhat arbitrary," but "southerners always question whether Florida is really part of the South."[24] This questioning is mainly due to Florida's transient population, mostly retired snowbirds from the North and Northeast United States. The coastal city Unitarian Universalist fellowships and churches reflect this truth, as many members from northern states come down to stay for the winter and then return north in late spring to late autumn. Although Lakeland does have a snowbird population, it has not been as robust as coastal cities, and so the city possesses a different character than its more touristy, coastal neighbors.

As Ulbrich notes, Florida has forty-three congregations, and seventeen of those congregations began as fellowships.[25] The Lake Region Unitarian (Unitarian Universalist after 1961) Fellowship, now called the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, was one of those fellowships. In 2008, when she published this work, Florida had one-quarter of the Unitarian Universalists in the ten southern states, a significant amount. However, perhaps due to its large geographic area, Florida is notoriously unorganized on a state level, and its congregations are not very well connected. Ulbrich writes about Florida, "it has been challenging to build community within a congregation let alone develop support between congregations."[26]

Ulbrich's concluding chapter asks if the fellowship movement was a "brilliant inspiration or disastrous strategy?" While opinions run the gamut from "wildly positive" to "extremely

[24] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 64.
[25] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 83.
[26] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 84.

negative," people interviewed concluded that the movement has done more good than harm.[27] Most relevant to this thesis is Ulbrich's mention of the empowerment of women in congregational leadership. Ulbrich observed, "Fellowships…made room for more women in positions of leadership in the 1960s and 1970s…Women often adopted a more egalitarian and collaborative approach, which facilitated the emerging pattern of shared ministry."[28] She concludes that this, amongst other attributes of the movement, has contributed in no small way to the fact that Unitarian Universalism is alive and well today. The movement has "challenged," as well as "enriched" and "revitalized" Unitarian Universalism.[29]

Aside from these two monumental works on the fellowship movement, authors who have written comprehensive histories on Unitarian Universalism have included insight into this important growth strategy. David Robinson's 1985 history mentions the fellowship movement in the context of examining individualism and organization. He writes: "Nowhere, perhaps, does the spirit of individualism…exist more purely than in these fellowships."[30] Yet Robinson also acknowledges the fellowship movement as vital to the growth of Unitarian Universalism in a section entitled "The Unitarian Renaissance."[31]

John Buehrens covered the fellowship movement in his 2011 history, *Universalists and Unitarians in America.* Here, the fellowship movement is presented alongside other contributors to growth after WWII, namely Frederick May Eliot, AUA president from 1937 to 1958, who bridged the gaps between humanists, theists, and Christians, and Unitarian ethicist and theologian James Luther Adams, who emphasized the importance of being effective towards

[27] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 112.
[28] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 115.
[29] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 117.
[30] David Robinson, *The Unitarians and Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 155.
[31] Robinson, *The Unitarians and Universalists*, 167.

solving social problems instead of debating religious vocabulary.[32] While the philosophies these two men developed were essential to emphasizing the relevance of Unitarianism in a world when totalitarianism was rising, Buehrens credits the fellowship movement as essential to the growth of the denomination.[33] Buehrens' history explores the role of Munroe Husbands, "director of fellowships, associate director of extension, and clerk of the Church of the Larger Fellowship" offering insight into the processes and procedures that Husbands used to start fellowships and the dedication with which he worked.[34]

The *UU World* magazine, the periodical of the Unitarian Universalist Association, featured two articles about the fellowship movement. Holley Ulbrich wrote one and included excerpts from her 2008 book. Warren Ross, the author of *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, wrote the other. While his writing includes anecdotes from fellowships in the Western United States, such as Boulder and Bismarck, the larger purpose of his article is to raise awareness of the fellowship movement as a bold endeavor, one which "gave the denomination far greater geographical reach and indelibly shifted its theological identity, its culture, and its worship practices."[35] Ross covers the history of the fellowship movement starting with the AUA's minister-at-large, Lon Ray Call, and includes anecdotal evidence related to the conflict between fellowships and ministers.[36] Ross mentions

[32] John A. Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America* (Boston: Skinner House, 2011), 153-154.

[33] Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, 162.

[34] Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, 162.

[35] Warren Ross,"The Bold Experiment of the Fellowship Movement," *UU World Magazine*, March 17, 2015, https://www.uuworld.org/articles/bold-experiment-fellowship-movement.

[36] Ross tells of the grumblings of some ministers when Munroe Husbands was presented with the Distinguished Service Award in 1974 at the General Assembly. They thought his enormous efforts should not be celebrated due to the assertive anti-clerical stance that had arisen in some fellowships. See: Ross, "The Bold Experiment of the Fellowship Movement."

that most ministers who carry negative feelings about the fellowships recognize the movement as having positive effects on the growth of the denomination and even on our larger UU culture.

Ross cites Bartlett's book frequently in his article, highlighting her optimism, as well as work done by the Reverends John Morgan and Tom Chulak, who also recognized fellowships as "exciting places to be." He concludes his article with the lesson he thinks we can take from the history of the fellowship movement: "to assure the continuity of the new congregations by wedding institutional strength to their enthusiasm, their pride in personal discovery, their sense of being a family" and not merely to satisfy the needs of the founders but also to build for future generations.

The UU Studies Network online database includes articles that mention the fellowship movement at the intersections of class and race. Historian and minister Mark W. Harris writes about classism in Unitarian Universalism and examines where fellowships were purposefully planted and grown in wealthier suburbs and college towns. In theory, our democratic faith says all are welcome, but church extension was only seen as viable if planted in the areas with people who had money and education.[37] Lakeland has been home to Florida Southern College since 1921, and while the fellowship did meet there during their beginning years in the late 1950s, the college was never mentioned in any of the correspondences as a reason that Lakeland would be a satisfactory place for church extension.

Rev. Gordon Gibson offers another perspective regarding the relationship between beginning fellowships during the midcentury and the inclusiveness of people of color. Frequently, fellowships without a church building of their own and renting space, especially in the Southern states, would be asked to leave if African Americans attended their congregations.

[37] Mark W. Harris, "2008 Minns Lecture: A Faith for the Few, UU Studies Network," UU Studies Network, accessed January 12, 2024, https://www.uustudiesnetwork.org/2008-minns-lecture-a-faith-for-the-few/.

They moved from place to place until they could afford to purchase their own real estate and even hire a minister. Many of these churches became the only safe places, "at least on the white side of town," where an integrated Human Relations Council could meet.[38] There is no indication that the Human Relations Council that Lakeland lay leader Cleo E. Thomas (A.K.A. "Tommie") was involved with met at the Troy Ave. location, but the Tommie Award—named in honor of Thomas—was awarded to African American organizations in the 1970s. No reports have been uncovered that indicate this was a problem in the neighborhood where the church bought its building, but the Ku Klux Klan boldly marched in the area until the 1990s. Currently, the congregation has neighbors that complain about the Black Lives Matter banner that hangs on the building and BLM flags have been stolen from it twice.

The literature on the fellowship movement highlights the movement's blessings and challenges. The fellowship movement was an experiment, a radical new idea, and contributed to the strength of the UUA. But these texts do not focus on the intersection of the fellowship movement and gender or highlight the role of women. The fellowship movement empowered women to be leaders and even clergy, but histories of the movement primarily center on male leadership. A deep examination of how the fellowship movement alleviated the oppressions of sexism and provided the opportunity for women's work to be valued and generative for the church extension endeavor has yet to be written. Perhaps a key question is, would Unitarian (Universalist) churches still exist without the labor and leadership of women? And how did the fellowship movement allow for women to make significant contributions to the growth of

[38] Gordon Gibson, "Southern Unitarian Universalists in the Civil Rights Era," UU Studies Network, accessed January 12, 2024, https://www.uustudiesnetwork.org/2000-southern-unitarian-universalists-in-the-civil-rights-era/.

Unitarian Universalism? This is not to say that sexism ceased to exist (it was still very much present), but the empowerment of lay leaders by the AUA in the fellowship movement led to a democratization of leadership and allowed women agency in creating a religious community. Through a case study of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland and its historical context this thesis traces the vision, labor, and leadership of the women who loved and nurtured it into existence.

Unitarian Universalism in Lakeland, Florida

It is not well known–even to the congregation itself–that progressive faith has deep roots here, going back to the founding of the City of Lakeland in 1884 by Abraham Munn, a Unitarian from Kentucky. But Munn did not come to Lakeland to establish a church. He was focused on opportunities for his business that produced agricultural implements. He purchased eighty acres of land, plotted a town, and built a railroad station.[39] Lakeland was incorporated the following year.[40] One could say that Munn inadvertently set the stage for the story of Unitarian Universalism to unfold in this small, subtropical city.

The growing of liberal faith in Lakeland was no easy task. Archival materials show that there were at least five attempts at establishing a church: first an attempt by Universalists in the 1920s, with a joint endeavor with the Unitarians in the late twenties, again an endeavor by Unitarians in the 1930s, and then two attempts by Unitarians via the American Unitarian Association's Fellowship Movement in the 1950s. Lack of financial support and commitment by the Universalist General Convention and the American Unitarian Association, the mistrust

[39] "Abraham Munn," Wikipedia, last modified April, 17, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Munn.

[40] "Lakeland," Wikipedia, last modified February 26, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakeland.

between the Universalist and Unitarian denominations, and the Great Depression created obstacles to starting a church. But the most regrettable obstacle was the sexism underlying the AUA's confidence in and responses to the women lay leaders of the 1920s.

Four white, middle-class women with vision and determination were at the forefront of the liberal religious movement in Lakeland. In the 1920s, Universalist lay leaders Flora B. Gentry and Bertha H. Steitz endured Universalist and Unitarian leadership's sexism as they labored to organize and lead a church. The efforts of Gentry and Steitz did not result in the long-term establishment of a church. However, they set a precedent for women's leadership in Lakeland, which surely did not go unnoticed, as Steitz was one of the founding members of the Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship in 1955. Patsy S. Eger was at the head of the organizing teams for both the failed 1952 attempts at a Unitarian fellowship and the long-lasting (and ongoing) 1955 Unitarian fellowship. Cleo E. Thomas came on the scene shortly after the LRUF began, and she contributed a substantial amount of work to help support the organization's longevity. The AUA's fellowship movement empowered lay leaders, both men and women, to establish local religious institutions without a minister. In Lakeland, the lay leaders contributing the necessary labor and vision were primarily women. The following pages reveal a history that illustrates the struggle of women lay leaders in the early twentieth century and the importance of the fellowship movement for these women to build the church successfully.

Lakeland, Polk County, Florida

The City of Lakeland, a part of Polk County, is in central Florida on the Interstate 4 corridor between Tampa on the west coast and Orlando to the northeast. Humans first arrived in Florida about thirteen thousand years ago, although new archaeological evidence continues to

place human settlement at an earlier time.[41] The Tocobaga lived in the Lakeland area when the Spanish first arrived in the 16th Century, consequently decimating the indigenous populations by 90% through disease and warfare.[42]

The Spanish colonizers, led by conquistador Juan Ponce de Leon, brought cattle to the area in 1521.[43] This began what has been one of the most important industries to Florida, and the Lakeland area specifically. Cattleman camps sprung up around Polk County, including Lakeland. Some of the cattle belonged to indigenous peoples who survived the Spanish and people from the northern Muscogee tribes who were forced to relocate and are now collectively known as Seminole. But most of the cattle belonged to white cowmen who kept their herds in unfenced pastures, where, "They rode small, tough ponies, and used dogs and long, braided leather whips to round up their cattle, which led to their now-famous moniker, Florida Crackers."[44] Other Euro-Americans began to settle in the area in the 1870s. The railroad reached the area in 1884 and contributed to an uptick in population growth. However, this also pushed the cowmen to different locations, including the Peace River area where indigenous communities lived, forcing them to move and take jobs wherever they could, "often working as farmhands or laborers."[45] Today, Seminole people in Florida run one of the largest cattle operations in the United States.[46] Cattle continue as a business in Lakeland, too, with a few pastures that housing developments haven't taken over still remaining.

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[41] "Florida of the Indians," Floridahistory.org, https://floridahistory.org/indians.htm.

[42] State Library and Archives of Florida, "Timeline," *Florida Memory*, accessed March 29, 2024, https://www.floridamemory.com/learn/exhibits/timeline/.

[43] Abby Jarvis, "Cracker Culture," *The Lakelander,* October 8, 2015, https://thelakelander.com/cracker-culture/.

[44] Jarvis, "Cracker Culture."

[45] Seminole Tribe Historical Preservation Office, "Seminole History," accessed March 21, 2024, https://stofthpo.com/seminole-history/.

[46] Seminole Tribe Historical Preservation Office, "Seminole History."

African American freedmen began settling in Lakeland in 1883. Initially, many of them came to work on the railroad and lived in the camps. Eventually, self-sustaining Black communities developed with residential neighborhoods, independently owned businesses, and churches. "Desegregation, commercialization, and eminent domain" broke apart these well-connected and supportive communities during the mid-twentieth century, forcing Lakeland's Black people to move to other places in the city where they were not able to thrive as they once had.[47]

In the early twentieth century, Lakeland experienced an economic boom. In 1920, the population was just over 7,000 people and growing rapidly. The 1920s land "boom" quickly went "bust" during the Great Depression; hurricanes hit in 1926 and 1928, and citrus crops were damaged by pests. Despite all this, Lakeland was able to recover.[48] This is largely due to Lakeland's location in the heart of Florida's "citrus belt," a land rich in orange and grapefruit trees, with easy access to truck and train transportation. It also had a growing phosphate mining industry. The Detroit Tigers established a summer training camp in 1934.[49] Frank Lloyd Wright was invited in 1938 to design buildings for the Florida Southern College campus, and after World War II, George Jenkins expanded the Publix Supermarket chain.[50] Its scenery includes rolling hills and plentiful lakes, making it an attractive place to live.[51] Many northerners were moving south not just to retire, as was a popular trend along coastal areas of Florida, but to make

[47] Breanna A. Rittman, "We're Going to Lose the History: What Happened to the Black communities of Polk County," *The Ledger*, February 16, 2022, https://www.theledger.com/story/news/local/2022/02/16/moorehead-pughsville-polk-county-florida-once-had-thriving-black-communities/9282625002/.

[48] "Brief History of Lakeland," City of Lakeland, accessed November 26, 2023, https://www.lakelandgov.net/departments/library/lakeland-history-room/brief-history-of-lakeland/.

[49] "Detroit Tigers," Florida Grapefruit League, July 15, 2020, https://floridagrapefruitleague.com/teams/detroit-tigers/#:~:text=This%20new%20offering%20celebrates%20the.

[50] "Brief History of Lakeland."

[51] "History of Lakeland Polk County Florida," Genealogytrails.com, accessed November 26, 2023, http://genealogytrails.com/fla/polk/history_lakeland.html.

a living. They sought to build religious communities like the ones they worshipped in in the north. By 1960, the population of Lakeland had grown nearly six times that of 1920 and reached 41,350.[52]

Universalists and Unitarians arriving in central Florida in the 1920s wanted their own churches, finding the other churches in town not a good fit. This is especially true for Gentry and Steitz, who had been lifelong Universalists. These two women not only grew up in the Universalist faith but were leaders in the movement. Gentry served in leadership roles for the Women's Universalist Missionary Association and Steitz in the youth movement.[53] Their faith shaped their lives and their leadership, and likewise, their leadership shaped their faith. As committed Universalists who lived their faith in both private and public spheres, what could they do but seek to build a church where Universalism could grow and become a part of other's lives, too? Who were these women who sought to bring Universalism to the city of Lakeland to spread the good news that everyone is worthy of God's love, and everyone is saved?

[52] US Census Bureau, "Census Publications," Census.gov, September 12, 2022, https://www.census.gov/library/publications.html.

[53] This was most often officially referred to as The Women's National Missionary Association of The Universalist Church, named so in 1905, but it is abbreviated as WUMA (Women's Universalist Missionary Association) in the *Universalist Yearbook.*

CHAPTER 1:

LAKELAND'S UNIVERSALIST HISTORY

Flora B. Gentry and Bertha H. Steitz, Universalists Lay Leaders

Flora B. Gentry and Bertha H. Steitz led active and powerful lives that deserve attention. Uncovering their lives reveals that they embodied their life-long Universalist faith, allowing for the values of that faith to guide and inform them. To gain perspective on the significance of their lives underscores the admonishment of the men who did not support them but should have. Uncovering their stories illuminates an important truth that needs to be rectified–women provided the work, the leadership, and the vision for liberal religion to grow in 1920s Lakeland yet were disenfranchised by the men in higher positions who they looked to for support. Gentry and Steitz are models for ethical and spiritual leadership. Their lives are sources of inspiration, and to pull them out of their hidden places in the archives, release them from the grips of patriarchy, and breathe power back into their visions can support our transformation towards a more just and loving world.

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Gentry was born Flora B. Harey in September 1867 in Allegan County, Michigan.[1] Although little is known about her young life, she appeared in 1915 as Flora B. Corning in Ohio newspapers and again in Lakeland newspapers from 1921 to 1924 under the same name. Letters to the Universalists and the Unitarians starting in 1927 are signed "Mrs. J. H. Gentry." Corning

[1] "Flora B. Harey Gentry (1867-1943)," Find a Grave, accessed November 25, 2023, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/225163003/flora-b-gentry#source.

was her first married name, Gentry her second. It appears she had at least one child, L.H. Corning, from her first marriage.[2]

In 1915, at 48 years old, she was the president of the Women's Universalist Missionary Alliance in Ohio. This organization was connected historically to The Women's Centenary Aid Association, founded in 1869, and renamed The Women's National Missionary Association of The Universalist Church in 1905.[3] It is recognized as the first organization of lay church women in the United States.[4] This association was largely responsible for spreading Universalism throughout the country and abroad. One scholar has argued, "Without the contributions of this vital women's organization, Universalism would have had much less impact. At the same time, Universalist women were empowered by their work, learning that they could indeed make a difference in the world."[5]

At the twenty-sixth annual convention of the Ohio chapter of the WUMA, Gentry gave an address to the meeting as president of the organization. *The Marion Star* reported on this convention, including excerpts from "the featuring number of the morning's program," Mrs. Flora B. Corning's address.[6] In her address, Gentry (Corning) focused on increasing WUMA membership throughout Ohio and, thus, their missionary work. She proclaimed, "the growing church is that which gives itself unreservedly to the extension of its faith and the appeal for missions is the appeal for the self-preservation of the church."[7] Gentry called for "loyal

[2] "Lakeland Personals," *The Tampa Tribune*, April 6, 1924.

[3] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women 1869 to 1955," pamphlet edited by Ida M. Folsom (The Association of Universalist Women: 1955), 15.

[4] "Collection: Association of Universalist Women. Records, 1869-1957," Hollis Archives, 2021, https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/12/resources/842.

[5] "Let Us Now Praise Universalist Women," Unitarian Universalist Heritage Society, accessed January 30, 2024, https://uuhhs.org/womens-history/uuwhs-publications/letusnow/.

[6] "Universalists Gathered Here," *The Marion Star*, June 15, 1915, 3.

[7] "Universalists Gathered Here."

cooperation" and asked the women present if they had "the vision." She ended her charismatic address with a big spiritual and ethical question: "Are you ready and willing to make the sacrifice if need be that we may do our duty to ourselves, our organization, our church, and our God? This is the appeal. I leave the response with you."[8] The next day, the Ohio WUMA re-elected Mrs. Flora B. Corning as their president.[9] At the same meeting, Mrs. F. B. Bishop was elected as the vice president of the Ohio WUMA and the Rev. F. B. Bishop as the Ohio Universalist General Convention's president. Bishop eventually became the Southern Superintendent of the Universalist Church and sought to spread Universalism in Florida. Bishop and Gentry knew one another prior to their work in Florida. This relationship has been a missing link in the history of starting a church in Lakeland.

Gentry (Corning) left Ohio in the early 1920s and moved to Lakeland. She married John H. Gentry, a funeral home director, sometime between 1925 and 1927 (a marriage record has not been located). She worked as the secretary-treasurer for his funeral home. Gentry likely met her husband through Bertha Steitz, as blurbs in the "Social and Personal" section of the *Lakeland Evening Telegram* indicate that Steitz and Mr. Gentry were acquainted and had traveled together to Crystal Springs for the death of one their friends, a previous Lakeland resident and fellow socialite, in 1922. When Gentry (Corning) moved to Lakeland, she initially lived on Vistabula St., only one block from Steitz on Osceola St. and just down the road from the Women's Club building and other popular meeting places where the women gathered.

J. H. Gentry was married at the time of Flora's arrival but divorced his wife, Caroline, in 1922. Caroline was twenty years older than him and was likely in poor health. She died three years later in 1925. Flora spent most of 1923 to the beginning of 1924 living in St. Petersburg,

[8] "Universalists Gathered Here."
[9] "Universalist Women Elect," *The Marion Star*, June 16, 1915, 4.

where she likely attended the growing Universalist-Unitarian church of that city.[10] The events on this early 1920s timeline paint an interesting picture of the web of relationships formed at the beginning of the Lakeland Universalist movement. If nothing else, they account for Gentry's time away from Lakeland after an initial visit from the Rev. Bishop and the unsuccessful first start of a Lakeland Universalist Society. They point to possible connections that Gentry had with the growing St. Petersburg church, which perhaps fueled her vision and determination for building a thriving Universalist church in Lakeland.[11]

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Steitz was born Bertha Ellen Hayes in Croton, Ohio in February 1883 but spent her childhood in Peoria, Illinois. She was a member of the Young People's Christian Union, a Universalist youth association.[12] In 1907, Hayes married William Steitz, an immigrant from Germany who worked as an insurance agent. By 1910, they were living in Lakeland and she was still connected to the youth association, writing from time to time for the YPCU publication, *Onward*.[13] Like Gentry, she wrote about growing the Universalist movement through mission work. In her article, Steitz poses research questions for her young readers about prison ministries and "first offenders," a common focus of Universalist women's missionary work.[14] She educates her readers on the conditions that boys and young men face in prison, urging them to reflect on

[10] "Lakeland Personals," *The Tampa Tribune*, April 6, 1924, 44.

[11] Flora Gentry died in 1943 (three years after her husband), at the age of seventy-five, due to complications from abdominal surgery. [11] "Flora B. Harey Gentry (1867-1943)," Find a Grave, accessed November 25, 2023, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/225163003/flora-b-gentry#source.

[12] Johannes, "Cruising Close By," *The Christian Leader*, Volume 29, Part 1, Feb. 13, 1926, 18.

[13] "Bertha Ellen (Hayes) Steitz (1883-1970)," Wikitree, https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Hayes-13061.

[14] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women," 17.

their Universalist values and find ways they can advocate for the improvement of the lives of these imprisoned men.[15]

Two years later, in 1912, Steitz started writing for the local *Lakeland Evening Telegram* newspaper. Her column, "The Ruminations of Uncle Henry" was written under the pseudonym Uncle Henry and became a big hit with the paper's readers. Steitz, a woman doing what was considered men's work at the time, knew that writing opinions as a man would be more effective than voicing them as a woman. As one journalist reflects in 1983, "it was such a success because of the unique quality of wit and humor with which Uncle Henry approached everyday problems as well as extending good advice (whether requested or not)."[16] Some of these everyday problems were women's issues, such as advocating for the need for a local women's club, as well as a literary society and a public library.[17] One 1912 *Ruminations* was especially powerful on this point. Evoking a Florida Cracker accent, she wrote: "There was two things I have been indendin to write about for a long time…One was a womins club for the purpose of advancin the interests of the city. Women is grate on runnin things and I like to see them have a chanct." Through the guise of Uncle Henry, Steitz was able to boldy approach this progressive subject. She did not stop at asking for people to give them a chance. She continued, with great foresight, looking to support her argument, "there aint a church which could run very long without womin to run it… After the ladys has made the money for the church, they ought to have the chanct to spend it." Steitz was advocating for power to be given to lay women in the church, an issue the Universalist

[15] Bertha Steitz, "Senior Devotional," *Onward* 17 (October 4, 1910): 316. https://books.google.com/books?id=6cIpAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA316&lpg=PA316&dq=bertha+steitz+city+editor+lakeland+fl&source=bl&ots=3lWWkNBLzo&sig=ACfU3U1dS_dWqICboCREHTUgfx4UxpnqgQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjlt5Som8qCAxVYRTABHaz_DiM4ChDoAXoECAMQAw#v=onepage&q=bertha%20steitz%20city%20editor%20lakeland%20fl&f=false.

[16] Martha F. Sawyer, "Once Upon a Time, Uncle Henry Spoke," *Lakeland Ledger,* September 14, 1983, 3C.

[17] Cinnamon Bair, "Columnist Not What He Seemed to Be," *Lakeland Ledger,* March 13, 2000, D1.

women's missionary associations fought for, and an issue she would face eleven years later in Lakeland. "If a man hollers about womin doin things in the busness world, that is allers a small man which knows that if a real smart woman was to take a hankerin to his job she could likely get it and do it better than he has been doin." Perhaps she was referring to her own experiences doing work traditionally given to men, but one can sense her frustrations with the sexism of the time and the lack of support from men. "I have had a notion all along that they could do things to help this town and that is what I am after…The other matter I was thinkin of is the subjeck of a publick library, and if the ladys undertakes this they had ought to be helped greatly by the men of this town…every man that haint done nothin to help the ladys get one had ought to feel smaller than new pertaters."[18] In this one ruminations article, she addresses several of the issues that women with vision had for improving society. And standing in the way of all these visions was sexism and the power of men.

Uncle Henry's Florida Cracker dialect, humor, and sincerity gave Lakelanders something to look forward to each week while also planting the seeds of progress in their minds. Steitz's "Ruminations of Uncle Henry" were geared towards motivating the people of Lakeland to improve their city by participating in everything from weeding lots next to downtown sidewalks to supporting the Chautauqua assembly when it came to town (another common project of Universalist women) to fixing up the local schools and building women's clubs and a library. But they also reflected her persistence, determination, and faithfulness to her Universalist values.

A decade later, Steitz had worked her way up to the role of city editor of *The Lakeland Evening Ledger*. She maintained that position for three years before being hired by *The Tampa Tribune.*[19] Although "Uncle Henry" still appeared on occasion in Lakeland just for the pleasure

[18] Bertha Steitz, "Ruminations of Uncle Henry," *The Lakeland Evening Telegram*, March 26, 1912, 4.
[19] Bair, "Columnist Not What He Seemed to Be."

of "his" readers, Steitz now used the byline "Mrs. William Steitz." Her reputation likely benefited from her husband, Captain William Steitz, and his status as a well-known World War I veteran and the Commander of the American Legion Department of Florida.[20] But writing, educating, and spreading the word about a hopeful liberal faith was a part of the culture of Universalist women's associations. As Ida M. Folsom, editor of a report on Universalist women's associations notes, "one of the most interesting features of the work was the preparation and presentation of denominational tracts as a part of a program of liberal evangelism."[21] Although Steitz did not approach evangelizing in quite this way, she was able to find the avenues available to her in Lakeland.

Steitz's newspaper work was reported on in *The Christian Leader*, the lead Universalist publication at the time. In 1926, an author with the name of "Johannes" praised Steitz and claimed she was "a leader among the literary women of the entire region round about."[22] Johannes recalls visiting Lakeland with Superintendent Bishop, where they witnessed Steitz busily at work in the city room of the *Ledger*. Johannes wrote admiringly, "If the Y.P.C.U. helped train her it has reason to feel proud."[23] In addition to this busy full-time position at the paper, Steitz was also appointed head of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs (FFWC) press department. In this new position, Steitz wrote "News of Interest to Club Women of State," which included updates on music, politics, and public welfare. *The Tampa Tribune* ran a piece reporting this new position and added that Steitz had also been the chairman of highway beautification in

[20] "Legion Picks Tarpon Springs," *The Orlando Sentinel*, May 9, 1926, 1.
[21] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women 1869 to 1955," 17.
[22] Johannes, "Cruising Close By: XV Motoring Across Florida," 18.
[23] Johannes, "Cruising Close By: XV Motoring Across Florida," 18.

the State Beautification Division of the FFWC.[24] Her energy appeared boundless as she engaged in these many positions with her Universalist values intact.

By 1928, Lakeland continued to experience growth and developed a booming tourist trade. Many considered Steitz as "the" tourist department for the Lakeland Chamber of Commerce because, "She organized the entertainment for tourists and created the schedules for maintaining an active daily pace tourists enjoyed while visiting."[25] *The Tampa Times* called Steitz a "busy bee" after observing her busily answering questions from tourists in the friendliest manner. They also report that Steitz is "known throughout the state for various welfare and club activities. She is now serving for the third year as department chairman of child welfare work in the American Legion Auxiliary," in addition to her work with the FFWC and as the secretary and vice president of the state conference of social workers.[26] Again, Steitz is doing work that was an integral part of the Universalist women associations. "There has always been a strong interest among Universalists in the field of social action as well as in social welfare," writes Folsom in her history of Universalist women as she describes the many ways in which the women connected themselves to social welfare organizations in the United States and around the world. In 1934, Steitz revived the official publication of the State Department of Public Welfare, entitled *Florida Welfare Progress*. "Bertha H. Steitz of Lakeland has arrived in Tallahassee to spend the next few weeks instituting the Progress in its new career and doing other special work for the department. Mrs. Steitz has had varied experience in the field of social welfare and in 1933 made a state-wide survey of child welfare for the American Legion."[27] Steitz continued this work, attending social worker training and conferences around the state into the 1940s. It is only in the

[24] "New Chairman of Publicity," *The Tampa Tribune*, January 11, 1925, 18.
[25] Sawyer, "Once Upon a Time, Uncle Henry Spoke."
[26] "Lakeland Tourist Bureau Head is A Busy Woman," *The Tampa Times,* February 27, 1930, 15.
[27] "Public Welfare Board to Revive Magazine," *Tallahassee Democrat*, May 14, 1934, 3.

1950s, as Steitz entered her seventies, that she began to transfer her social welfare responsibilities to other women.[28]

Steitz's vision, work, and early "ruminations" were not in vain. She successfully formed a women's club, the Lakeland Sorosis Club, and became its first president.[29] Steitz also ventured into the business world and became a co-owner of a bookstore in the downtown area of Lakeland.[30] The City of Lakeland did build a library, and it was likely connected to her urgings. Steitz's brother-in-law, Thomas W. Bryant, purchased the land for the library.[31] The Lakeland Public Library opened at the beginning of 1927. Before that time, the Woman's Club maintained a library for residents to use.[32] No doubt, Bertha Steitz was heavily involved. A 1949 *Tampa Tribune* article named Steitz the "General Federation Chairman of Library Service" of the Lakeland Public Library as they announced her arrival in Zephyrhills to give a talk.[33] Steitz was "a very popular public speaker, her talents of witty ruminations being much in demand."[34] This is evidenced by the many announcements in the papers throughout Florida from the 1920s to the 1950s of Mrs. William Steitz from Lakeland coming to speak.[35] Steitz influenced people not only in Lakeland and Polk County, but all around the state. She passed away in 1970 at the age of eighty-seven.

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[28] "Clubwomen Pay Tribute to McCarty," *The Orlando Sentinel*, October 6, 1953, 13.

[29] Bair, "Columnist Not What He Seemed to Be."

[30] Sawyer, "Once Upon a Time, Uncle Henry Spoke."

[31] Bryant was married to William Steitz's sister. He was a prominent lawyer and political figure in Lakeland whose name appears on several buildings around town, including the popular "Bryant Stadium" where the Lakeland High School football team plays. Bair, Cinnamon, "Bryant a Behind the Scenes Force," *The Lakeland Ledger,* October 4, 2011, https://www.theledger.com/story/news/2011/10/04/bryant-a-behind-the-scenes-force/26451908007/.

[32] "About the Library," *City of Lakeland*, accessed November 28, 2023, https://www.lakelandgov.net/departments/library/about-the-library/.

[33] "Lakeland Head to Speak Today in Zephyrhills," *Tampa Tribune,* March 18, 1949, 17.

[34] Sawyer, "Once Upon a Time, Uncle Henry Spoke."

[35] For example: "Busy Christmas Sorosis Program," *Tampa Times*, December 27, 1929. "Mrs. William Steitz Is Guest Speaker At Woman's Club Meeting," *Tampa Tribune,* October 18, 1949. "Mrs. William Steitz To Be Guest Speaker at Sorosis Club Meeting," *Tampa Tribue,* March 9, 1950.

The lives of Gentry and Steitz have been unknown to recent members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland. Consequently, the congregation has not understood the historical impact of their faith on the City of Lakeland. Without knowledge of these roots, the congregation is missing important stories they can be proud of, stories that would empower them to be greater agents for change. For example, the Lakeland Public Library has been an important space for people, providing vital services to the community that support literacy and education. They recently built into their space a history room that highlights the stories of people and communities of diverse backgrounds that contributed to the growth and culture of this city. The Lakeland Sorosis Club is now the Junior League of Greater Lakeland, a women's club that has, as their website states, "added and continues to add to the quality of life in Lakeland" for 91 years.[36] The Junior League organizes the Lakeland Christmas Parade, a huge event that brings together the people of the city and surrounding area. They have coordinated the World Reading Festival, a clothes closet at a local high school, and the Learning Resource Center which provides tutoring services. They founded the Polk Museum of Art that sits directly across from the public library, and so much more. A line on their website reads: "Tackling tough problems with compassion and determination."[37] One cannot help but think that this may have been the motto for Steitz's own life. The embodied faith and vision of Universalist women had a profound impact on shaping the life of this city, whether they were successful in building a church or not. How can uncovering these stories propel the UUCL to reconnect their faith to these organizations, and others in the area, to work toward being greater agents for change?

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[36] "History of the Junior League Building," *Junior League of Greater Lakeland*, accessed March 5, 2024, https://www.jlgl.org/jlgl-building/history-of-the-junior-league-building/.

[37] "History of the Junior League Building," *Junior League of Greater Lakeland*.

The Universalist spirit was present in Lakeland before the associations in Boston ever realized it. Steitz arrived in Lakeland in 1910 and was already putting her values into action. To quote Uncle Henry, "the way to get folks stirred up is to be in a reel stirrin' humer yurselfs. You can't never boil water on a cold stove."[38] Steitz had the pot stirred up by 1923, before the arrival of Universalist officials who sought to plant Universalist churches. She and Gentry were qualified, committed Universalist leaders with strong speaking and writing skills and the ability to inspire people. Conditions in Lakeland for a Universalist church were optimal.

The Universalist Movement in 1920s Lakeland

In 1923, Rev. Frances B. Bishop, the Southern Superintendent of the Universalist Church, wrote an article for the *Universalist Leader* about a trip to Florida to review the potential to start new churches. Bishop named his efforts "A Florida Crusade" and argued that Florida needed an evangelistic effort to plant Universalist churches because "many Universalists are going into Florida to live, and so many are spending the winter months there."[39] Brimming with enthusiasm, Bishop described his week in Lakeland as "a revelation and an inspiration." He found "the people were more than cordial" and described "the wonderful orange groves, hanging heavy with fruit," the "fragrant blossoms," and "the bathing beaches and the golf links" that the area offered. Bishop recruited Dr. Tomlinson, a preacher from Worcester, Massachusetts, and Rev. George A. Gay, "a good singer and all around worker" from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to present a series of sermons to those interested in starting a Universalist church.[40] Bishop proclaimed his trip a success. He reported that a new Universalist society was started with Mr.

[38] Sawyer, "Once Upon a Time, Uncle Henry Spoke."
[39] F. B. Bishop, "A Florida Crusade," *Universalist Leader*, April 14, 1923, 13.
[40] Bishop, "A Florida Crusade."

F.B. Langley as its president, Mrs. Bertha H. Steitz as vice-president, and Mrs. Flora B. Corning as secretary-treasurer.[41] The trio of leaders were listed in the 1924 *Universalist Year Book*.[42]

Unfortunately, the Lakeland Universalist Society Bishop's team envisioned did not get off the ground in 1923. Ultimately, they lacked sufficient support and cooperation from the Universalist or Unitarian national leadership when they asked for support and resources to call and fund a minister. The history that unfolds in the following pages will reveal the complexities of the relationships that either sustained momentum during this and later attempts to start a church or served to undermine the efforts of Gentry and Steitz, who were the primary leaders of this early movement in Lakeland. The correspondences regarding these efforts in the 1920s reveal distrust between the Universalist and Unitarian denominations, a problematic relationship between minister and congregational leadership, and sexist attitudes on the part of the Universalist and Unitarian leadership that nullified and diminished women's leadership, experience, efforts, and wisdom.

Gentry penned a letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, secretary of the Universalist General Convention, in May of 1927, reflecting on the challenges the previous society had faced. She explained to him that on "Feb. 18th 1923, The Lakeland Universalist Society was organized with F.B. Langley as president and myself as secretary and treasurer, and in-so-far as Mr. Langley was concerned that settled the matter, as he never called a meeting of the society or showed any interest in it from that day to this." Gentry said that she did not have Langley's address and that he had moved to Gainesville after the establishment of the society.[43] What had been a hopeful start ended up being a bitter disappointment.

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[41] Bishop, "A Florida Crusade."

[42] *Universalist Year Book*, 1924, 156-157.

[43] Flora B. Gentry, Letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, May 3, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09 Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Archives and Special Collections, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

Without a church, Gentry and Steitz continued to do what they could, which was sustaining local meetings of the Women's Universalist Missionary Association in Lakeland. *The Universalist Yearbook* lists Gentry (Corning) as the local chapter president from 1924 to 1930. A 1924 *Tampa Tribune* blurb reported that at their March meeting, "plans for the organization of a study class in liberal religion were formulated."[44] Gentry (Corning) delivered an "interesting" talk about the purpose of the organization and, as she had as the president of the Ohio chapter, urged that the association "aim to serve not merely its denomination but the community as a whole."[45] In April of 1924, the WUMA hosted F.B. Bishop, who returned to Lakeland for another visit, and he "expressed his opinion that the Universalist Society should acquire a site as soon as possible for a church building."[46] There are no newspaper reports on the Universalists or the WUMA between 1925 and 1927. Still, momentum to form a church continued, as Gentry confirmed in a letter to Rev. Etz at the association, that on January 14, 1927, a new Liberal Religious Society in Lakeland had been formed and holding successful services with visiting ministers from other Florida churches.

Gentry described Lakeland as an "all the year city just as much as any northern city," and she claims that many of the people who had moved down were "of the liberal faith."[47] Members of the Society decided during a business meeting that they needed a minister as soon as possible to grow a permanent church. For this, they needed financial support from the associations. Making her case for this support, she wrote to Etz, "there are enough permanent residents to justify placing a man here on full-time, and should this be done we feel confident things will move. A number of families have been inquiring when we expected to open a Sunday school,

[44] "Guests for Week End," *The Tampa Tribune*, Sun Mar 9, 1924, 33.
[45] "Guests for Week End."
[46] "Universalists Hear Address by Rev. F.B. Bishop," *The Tampa Tribune*, April 6, 1924, 62.
[47] Gentry, Letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, May 3, 1927, Florida Congregational Records.

which seems encouraging." Gentry expressed a sense of urgency to secure a minister by September 1st and "to open a Sunday school by the 1st of October, otherwise these children will start in elsewhere when it will not be so easy to interest them."[48] Gentry's tone of concern and urgency is apparent, as is her inclination toward traditional hierarchical church structure, with a male minister, as the necessary way to have a proper church. Those beliefs were in step with the cultural norms of the day, but it is important to note that both the Unitarian and Universalist denominations had already ordained female ministers. Two of those female ministers were associated with the Orlando Unitarian church in the 1910s. It is unknown how much Steitz and Gentry knew about them and whether knowledge of their ministries may have empowered them to be strong leaders.

Etz already knew of the situation in Lakeland. He had contacted Steitz a few weeks before, asking for contributions from the Lakeland Universalists to the Universalist General Convention. Steitz responded tersely, "I have your letter about paying assessment to the convention. We do not have a Universalist church, but a Liberal Religious society, successor to the Universalist society. It is probable that it will result in the organization of a Liberal church– Universalist and Unitarian." Steitz expressed her unhappiness with the Universalist General Convention, as they were not contributing financially to her and Gentry's vision for a Lakeland church. She told Etz, "We are meeting with a much more cordial spirit on the part of the Unitarian denomination than from the Universalists, who seem reluctant to do anything for us." She continued in her reply that because they are not an organized church, they are not obligated to give the denomination any money.[49] In return, Etz chastised Steitz, replying, "I realize, of

[48] Gentry, Letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, May 3, 1927, Florida Congregational Records.

[49] Bertha H. Steitz, Letter to Roger F. Etz, April 21, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Archives and Special Collections, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

course, that not being an organized church you are not under any financial obligation to the denominations. By the same logic, the denominations are not under any obligation to make contributions to your society for work in Lakeland." This was just a technical clause, he explained to Steitz, and said they would help financially in the future if they found available resources, for "the sake of the liberal movement."[50] Etz's response to Flora Gentry's letter was similar and did not indicate that any action from the Universalist General Convention would satisfy the urgency with which she wrote. Etz explained, "we are handicapped here as in so many other places by the lack of financial support for denominational enterprises…[I]t is possible that we shall be in a position in the fall to start off with the right kind of man for that work."[51]

The tension between the Universalist General Convention leaders and the Universalist women in Lakeland was not surprising given the inability of the Universalists to manage an efficient administrative board at the national level, which could assist in the planting and growing of churches around the country. As historian Conrad Wright notes, "One could argue that Universalists were not eager to contribute to denominational work because the administration of affairs was not done well enough to inspire confidence and loyalty," and that there was a nearly constant lack of funds.[52] One might infer that the Universalists who had moved to Lakeland from northern Universalist churches, such as Flora Gentry and Bertha Steitz, were aware of these issues. Given that the Lakeland group's services were conducted by ministers from Tarpon Springs, St. Petersburg, and Orlando, they were also aware that partnering with the Unitarians was not just about theological compatibility–it was necessary for financial

[50] Roger F. Etz, Letter to Bertha H. Steitz, April 27, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[51] Roger F. Etz, Letter to Flora B. Gentry, May 6, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[52] Conrad Wright, *Congregational Polity* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997), 122.

sustainability and thus the perpetuity of any locally organized church. Additionally, according to the socials in the *Lakeland Evening Ledger* and *The Tampa Bay Times*, Gentry spent a considerable amount of time in St. Petersburg. As she was heavily involved in her faith, she likely spent time with the Universalist-Unitarian congregation, called The United Liberal Church, and was aware of both denominations' monetary support for the growth of that church.

The St. Petersburg United Liberal Church was started as a Universalist church by laywoman Pearl Cole. Rev. Ella Bartlett first served the church in 1914. The church became a joint endeavor between the denominations in 1927 to strengthen the liberal movement.[53] The church grew rapidly during the 1920s boom. In January 1928, Etz wrote to Rev. George F. Patterson, the secretary of the American Unitarian Association (AUA), regarding the issue of the congregation outgrowing its current meeting space. “My own reaction is that if we are to spend $15,000 on remodeling this building, we might better put it into a new church.”[54] A “beautiful Spanish-style church” was built on Mirror Lake in St. Petersburg. *The Christian Register* reported in 1930 that “with the cooperation of the two denominations, a more central location was secured and the present church erected.”[55] While the historical account of the St. Petersburg church on their website mentions that the membership contributed to a building fund started by the Ladies Aid Society in 1922, the Etz letter and *The Christian Register* article indicate that both the denominations gave a substantial amount of money to the St. Petersburg congregation, at least compared to what they were not very willing to offer the Lakeland society during this same period of time.

[53] “Our History,” Unitarian Universalist Church of St. Petersburg, FL, accessed January 30, 2024. https://uustpete.org/about-us/our-stories/history/.

[54] Roger Etz, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson D.D., January 12, 1928, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 4, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[55] *The Christian Register*, April 10, 1930.

The denominations also funded the combined church in Jacksonville, founded in 1909 as a Unitarian church, renamed as The United Liberal Church (Unitarian-Universalist) by the 1920s. This church floundered for many years. In 1916, the Members of the Standing Committee wrote to Mr. Louis C. Cornish, president of the AUA, concerned about finances and the decreased number of attendees, they wrote: "Some of us question very seriously whether it is right to attempt a church with an all year round minister."[56] Yet, the associations both sent money to support the church. Rev. James C. Coleman arrived there in the late 1920s. In 1927, Coleman wrote to Etz, "your checks have been coming promptly."[57] A press release for the church indicates that their weekly attendance was just over thirty-five.[58] Etz wrote to Patterson, "I personally have had my doubts for some time as to whether the work which is being done there is of any real value."[59] But yet, and despite his positive attitude towards Lakeland as a good location for growing a church, they funded the floundering Jacksonville church. It closed its doors in 1931. Jacksonville tried again and started a fellowship in the 1940s.[60]

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Following the examples of the St. Petersburg and Jacksonville societies, Gentry and Steitz did not confine their efforts to garnering support for their fledgling Universalist society just by asking the Universalist General Convention for money and a minister. Both women reached out to the Unitarians as well. Gentry communicated with Patterson at the AUA in 1927.

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[56] Members of the Standing Committee, Jacksonville, Letter to Louis C. Cornish, December 27, 1916, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[57] James C. Coleman, Letter to Roger F. Etz, August 30, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[58] James C. Coleman, "Letter to the Editor," August 30, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[59] Roger F. Etz, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson D.D., March 25, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[60] Ron Lay Call, "Preliminary Survey of Jacksonville," December 1, 1944, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

She received a cordial response stating that the Unitarians were ready and able to cooperate. Unlike the Universalists, the Unitarians agreed to contribute one thousand dollars for the Lakeland Liberal Religious Society's fiscal year with the caveat that the Universalist General Convention could do the same.[61] Patterson explained, "We sincerely hope that the Universalist General Convention and the people in Lakeland will feel that they can cooperate with us" and that the AUA felt that, "from all reports…your city is in an extremely advantageous point for the propagation of Liberal Christianity." Patterson was not willing to send a minister and financial support unless the effort was supplemented by the Universalist General Convention and the local group.[62]

Gentry and Steitz had been working to secure funds from the local group yet were in a bind by the lack of real commitment from the associations. They needed a minister to grow the church and their finances. The people wanted to establish a Sunday school but were waiting for a minister. If a minister was not sent, members would leave to meet their religious needs elsewhere, taking their money with them and not fulfilling the pledges they had made. Because the Universalist General Convention refused to support the agreement, the Unitarians did not send funds to the nascent organization. Although attendance had been increasing throughout 1927 at the Lakeland society's gatherings, no hope for additional support was given to them by the associations.

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While Gentry and Steitz nurtured the Universalist society in Lakeland and worked hard to organize a church throughout 1927, Patterson, John Smith Lowe (General Superintendent of the

[61] George F. Patterson, Letter to Flora B. Gentry, July 5, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[62] Patterson, Letter to Flora B. Gentry, July 5, 1927.

UGC), and even the Orlando Unitarian minister, Rev. George Badger, corresponded with one another about establishing a church in Lakeland and sending the Rev. Turrell down to serve. Despite being aware of Gentry and Steitz in Lakeland and their efforts to organize a church in Lakeland, these men did not include them in their conversation. John Smith Lowe had a positive attitude about Lakeland and wrote to Patterson, "I'm not surprised at the report on Lakeland…I know there are real possibilities in that field."[63] Patterson wrote to Lowe in July, informing him that the AUA was prepared to send a thousand dollars to Lakeland.[64] Lowe responded that the Universalists could not fund Lakeland unless they pull out of Miami, which they were considering.[65] Badger was encouraging Lakeland. "The Lakeland Enterprise is worthwhile and now is the time to get at it," and "the community is at the stage where the reaction to a liberal movement will be vital."[66] None of their letters mention Gentry or Steitz. They appear more preoccupied with their interdenominational relationship, assuring one another that they are playing fairly. But what was Badger doing meddling around in the affairs of a Universalist church?

In Badger's history in Orlando, we see blatant sexism and the belittling of women. Cynthia Grant Tucker reveals Badger's goal to "let Boston's higher command know how well he was holding their ground in the Florida field" by actively working against the Unitarian minister Mary Safford as she tried to establish mission work in Florida.[67] Badger happily accepted

[63] John Smith Lowe, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., March 18, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[64] George Patterson, Letter to Rev. John Smith Lowe, July 5, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[65] John Smith Lowe, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., July 7, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[66] George H. Badger, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., November 5, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[67] Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 1994), 228.

Safford's money to help improve the Orlando church building, but "accepting her money was one thing; accepting her leadership was something else."[68] Tucker reports that in correspondence with Samuel Eliot, president of the AUA, he agreed with Badger's sentiment that what the liberal movement needed was more "resolute men" and not more women. Although Safford was a minister and likely had power that felt threatening to Badger, he was successful in shutting down her missionary work in the state of Florida. It is important to re-emphasize that Steitz and Gentry kept the Women's Universalist Missionary Association afloat in Lakeland during the 1920s. Was Badger meddling so that he could ensure the WUMA was shut down? He supported the building of a church in Lakeland, but what were his motives? If he wanted to give the impression to the association that he had everything under control in Florida, was this a power play?

Eleanor Gordon, who was minister of the Orlando church before Badger took over, "decried the denomination's insidious bias against women clergy after the First World War."[69] Eliot refused to fill ministerial positions with women. His sexist practices were well known throughout the association, and as one person at the association responded to a woman applicant for a position in New York, "he was not expected to change his ways."[70] Patterson worked directly under Eliot. How much did Eliot's discriminatory attitudes influence him? While it is difficult to know for sure the answer to these questions, there are solid indications that Steitz and Gentry were being discriminated against because they were women.

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Not to be discouraged by either of the associations' lack of support, Gentry and Steitz continued their efforts to start a church. Gentry knew there had been talk by the Universalist and

[68] Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*, 228.
[69] Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*, 227-228.
[70] Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*, 227.

Unitarian leadership about sending the Rev. Thomas Turrell, previously of the Second Unitarian Church in West Somerville, Massachusetts, to Lakeland as minister.[71] Taking the matter into her own hands, Gentry telegrammed Rev. Turrell to ask if he could come down to Lakeland, and she inquired if he had heard any news from either of the denominations. A note at the bottom of the telegram recorded his reply. Turrell said he was awaiting official word from the Universalists.[72] Turrell also forwarded Gentry's telegram to the AUA. Patterson sent a telegram to Gentry a few days later, letting her know that the Unitarians were accommodating the Universalists who wished not to start a minister until autumn and that the Lakeland group could "well carry on until that time under the present arrangement."[73] Either Gentry did not believe their promises, or she felt a stronger sense of urgent need, or perhaps she did not appreciate being ignored, so she corresponded with both associations from May to July, urging them to move more quickly. In a letter to Patterson, she complained that "it is perhaps difficult for you people there to realize the exact situation here…We have a considerable number of liberal church people here, but coming here, and finding no church of their faith here they have gone in to other churches."[74] Clearly, Gentry and other lay leaders were watching potential members attend and then fade away when they realized the society lacked a minister or a Sunday school.

Gentry stood firm in her commitment to liberal faith in her letter, however. She explained that she could not find any other church with which she identified and indicated that others held this same sentiment: "It seems to those of us most closely connected with the situation that there

[71] "Somerville," *The Boston Globe*, June 11, 1923, 7.

[72] Flora B. Gentry, Telegraph to Rev. Thomas Turrell, March 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[73] George F. Patterson, Telegraph to Flora Gentry, March 26, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[74] Flora B. Gentry, Letter to George F. Patterson, July 27, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

is a growing need of a liberal church in this community, in fact we feel that the past season has demonstrated not only the need, but the desire of a considerable number of people for such an organization, and it only remains for the denominations to get behind the movement, to make a success of it."[75] Gentry is confident that a liberal church can grow in Lakeland, and one of the men from the Lakeland group finally wrote a letter in 1929 to Patterson backing her up. Although too late to make a difference, it is evidence that Gentry and Steitz were erroneously ignored and not taken seriously by Patterson and Etz.

In this 1929 letter, Lakeland board member E.M. Lewis recalled the attendance growth of the Universalist Society in Lakeland as initially quite strong. Lewis described the society's beginning with only a few individuals who wanted to hear sermons different from what was preached elsewhere in the city. However, the group quickly gained traction, with an average of sixty attending each week and a high attendance number of three hundred and fifty, which far exceeded Jacksonville's attendance and possibly even St. Petersburg's. Leading worship, ministers from other Universalist and Unitarian churches in central Florida filled the pulpit. The Lakeland leadership appointed a committee to secure a regular meeting place and to ask for financial support. Lewis reported that they had been successful. But as the Universalists delayed action in promising funds for a permanent minister, commitment from the local people waned. As Gentry had warned, members left to attend other congregations.[76] The individuals committed to forming a liberal Lakeland church watched potential members walk out the door and not return. The disappointment in their associations, especially the Universalist General Convention,

[75] Gentry, Letter to George F. Patterson, July 27, 1927.

[76] E.M. Lewis, Letter to George F. Patterson, month and day illegible, 1929, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

must have been heavy. The morale within the congregation must have been low when, finally, Turrell arrived.

He did not come in September of 1927 as Gentry requested but sent a wire to Lakeland in October that said, "see you all soon."[77] Lakeland was excited, but he was still not there by November. On November 16, 1927, Gentry wrote a letter to the minister of the Tarpon Springs church, Dr. Louis J. Richards. She had read in *The Christian Leader* that he had recently visited Boston, and she hoped that he might have acquired some information about the Lakeland situation, she wrote to the Tarpon Springs minister: "Their indecision and continued silence is putting us in a very embarrassing situation…If there are no prospects of the denominations taking up the work permanently here we would like to know it as it is not fair to any of us to withhold some positive and definite information."[78] Dr. Richards did not respond to Gentry but instead forwarded the letter to Etz at the General Convention. Etz wrote to Gentry that they had only just decided on the Lakeland situation the week before and that he "regretted exceedingly that we are not able to go ahead with work in Lakeland as it has always appealed to me."[79] Offering no explanation on why he changed his mind, Etz directed Gentry to carry on this year as they had done last year, with visiting ministers. Once again, Gentry and her Lakeland society were let down by the Universalists. To reiterate, the Universalists were sending money to the flourishing St. Petersburg society and the floundering Jacksonville church, both who had male ministers.

[77] Flora B. Gentry, Letter to Dr. Louis J. Richards, November 16, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[78] Gentry, Letter to Dr. Louis J. Richards, November 16, 1927.

[79] Roger F. Etz, Letter to Flora B. Gentry, November 25, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

Finally, in December, letters between Patterson and Etz presented a new solution to Lakeland's problems. Patterson told Etz he wanted him to know all the facts of the situation. In an effort to overcome the historic skepticism and mistrust between the two associations, Patterson informed Etz that the Unitarians had no interest in forming a church in Lakeland "along strictly denominational lines" and that he understands that there are more Universalists than Unitarians in Lakeland.[80] At the same time, Patterson indicated that the AUA felt it necessary to oblige the Lakeland people requesting a minister and that "Turrell received a letter a few days ago urging Lakeland again. Briefly, it asked that a minister be sent, they [Lakeland] to pay the running expenses and we to put up the entire salary. Of course, it is not difficult to get things going on a proposition like this, but I thought I would test out their desire for a church and so I wired that we would take on until April 30th, two-thirds of the burden of the minister's salary at the rate of $3,000 per year, provided they would take on one-third and the local overhead. To my surprise I got a wire the following day that they were prepared to do that."[81] Etz replied with much appreciation for the AUA's "fine spirit" and willingness to support the Lakeland society. While regretful that the General Convention could not send funds, he once again affirmed that Lakeland was one of the "finest opportunities" in Florida.[82]

Patterson does not state who wired this proposition to Turrell and the AUA, but it surfaces in later letters that it was Gentry again. What is most curious is Patterson's motivation behind his counteroffer, which was to "test out their desire for a church." Does this suggest the AUA disregarded Gentry's pleas from the past several months and that the letters from Patterson

[80] George F. Patterson, Letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, D.D., December 7, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[81] Patterson, Letter to Rev. Roger F. Etz, D.D., December 7, 1927.

[82] Roger F. Etz, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., December 8, 1927, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

in response to her were simply to mollify her anxieties? Clearly, Gentry had been boldly expressing her desire for a church for quite some time. Three hundred and fifty people attending a worship service is significant. Why were the desires of the highly competent woman lay leaders in Lakeland being ignored?

Rev. Turrell Arrives in Lakeland

The Unitarian minister Thomas Turrell arrived in Lakeland sometime in December of 1927. The Lakeland Liberal Religious Society successfully struck a deal with the AUA for Turrell to serve from December until April 30th of the next year. But shortly after his arrival, the situation soured. At first, it appeared that this was mainly due to the Great Depression. Turrell wrote a panicked letter to Patterson at the AUA at the beginning of January 1928. He indicated, "Florida is experiencing a violent reaction, is hitting bottom, and will go lower yet."[83] He wrote about the depressed mood of the people and the closing of banks, hotels, theaters, and possibly schools. He told Patterson that people were leaving and heading back north. The population of Lakeland had decreased so much that another local minister commented that he thought they would all have to leave soon enough.[84] Turrell closed his letter with the question, "Is this the opportune moment?" He told Patterson he does not believe investing in the Lakeland society is worth three thousand dollars. Subsequent letters from Lakeland people confirm that members were experiencing dire financial circumstances and many were leaving town. However, accusations that Turrell made in his letter about Gentry point to a strained relationship that might have also been at the root of Turrell's decision to leave.

[83] Thomas Turrell, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., January 9, 1928, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[84] Turrell, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., January 9, 1928.

With a rather dramatic tone, Turrell explained to Patterson that he had been skeptical of the "situation" in Lakeland and decided to investigate "through a process of critical inquiry." He claimed that, at first, the members in Lakeland were encouraging and trying to make a good impression. But then, he got into their "secret thoughts." He explained, "first (and this will surprise you), I discovered to my utter amazement–not to say, consternation–that the letter sent by Mrs. Gentry, the secretary, on which we acted, was not official."[85] Turrell claimed she was "acting out of office" and "expressing her own immediate and personal reaction." He seemed to be indicating that Gentry's affirmative response to Patterson about making the final salary deal was merely out of spite towards the Universalist General Convention's inability, or unwillingness, to contribute and that she had not consulted the other congregation members. Turrell claimed that after he arrived, the Lakeland group told him that the other thousand dollars would be up to him to find and that their only guarantee was their "confidence" in him.[86] He did not stay in Lakeland until the agreed upon April 30th date but instead went to the Tampa church to minister. He remained there for two years before going to Boston to work for the AUA.[87]

Dr. Hardin and E. M. Lewis from the Lakeland congregation wrote to Patterson in the following months. Neither of their letters indicate that Gentry acted on her own and without the support of the other leadership. Contrary to Turrell's story, Lewis stated that the group met to discuss the AUA's proposition and voted to accept it.[88] By all accounts, the rest of the Lakeland leadership was supportive and had successfully canvassed the people for pledges. The reality of the situation was they were ill-prepared for a financial depression and its consequences. What is more, Hardin and Lewis spoke fondly of Turrell, as if they were unaware of his negative feelings

[85] Turrell, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., January 9, 1928.
[86] Turrell, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., January 9, 1928.
[87] "Former Unitarian Pastor Here is Married," *The Tampa Times*, May 5, 1931, 10.
[88] Lewis, Letter to George F. Patterson, month and day illegible, 1929.

towards the congregation. They spoke with sympathy for him, as they describe how sorry they felt that at some point in the early spring of 1928, Turrell had to leave to bury his wife and bring his young children back to Florida with him. "Upon his return, he at once started his work in Tampa, and as it was quite a hardship for him to come to Lakeland, and as he had to bring his little ones along…it was thought an unnecessary hardship to insist that he undergo the burden."[89] The letters from both Hardin and Lewis seem most sincere in their warm feelings and sympathy towards Turrell and their intentions to do the best they can, as soon as they can, to get the rest of the money they owe him.

Certainly, the circumstances of the Great Depression, and the death of Turrell's wife added undue stress to an already tense situation and perhaps accelerated his departure. But why make false accusations against Gentry? Was there a power struggle with Gentry? And perhaps even with Steitz, although we do not have any evidence for what she was doing or thinking during this time, we might assume she was in alliance with Gentry. For women in 1927, Gentry and Steitz were strong leaders with determination and commanding voices, as is noticeable in their letters. Gentry was persistent in her letter writing and, rightfully so, impatient. Gentry and Steitz also had a strong vision for what their faith should look like, fostered through their many years with the WUMA. Did Turrell not meet their expectations?

This is where Orlando minister George Badger enters the scene once again. Badger, who continued to meddle in Lakeland affairs, wrote to Patterson in early February 1928, describing the Lakeland situation as "going slowly" and said the people felt discouraged. He stated, "their feeling is that Turrell is lying down on the job."[90] Badger felt that perhaps, in the months of

[89] Dr. E. B. Hardin, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., May 7, 1928, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[90] George H. Badger, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., February 2, 1928, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

anticipation for Turrell's arrival, the Lakeland leadership had talked him up, but he was not meeting their expectations. Badger described himself as a knowledgeable and experienced mentor who took it in his own hands to talk to Turrell with the "sagacity" of a veteran. He convinced Turrell to start in Tampa at the Unitarian church in February. Did Badger also urge the conflict between Turrell and Gentry? Did he encourage Turrell to damage Gentry's reputation with the associations in an effort to discredit and disempower her? Was this necessary to save Turrell's reputation and to boost Badger's in some way? Why were there sour feelings between Turrell and Gentry but not between Turrell and the male lay leaders in Lakeland? The inconsistencies point to dishonest male ministers who lacked the integrity to develop healthy working relationships that could grow the faith.

Badger not only held sexist beliefs and performed discriminatory actions towards women, but he was skeptical of the Universalists and believed the Unitarian "entanglement" with them was "going to be increasingly embarrassing" as time went on.[91] He encouraged Patterson to "get our stakes in while we can." Badger was not looking to exclude the Universalists, he simply wanted to ensure that the Unitarians were taking charge of the task of establishing and growing liberal churches in Florida. Badger believed that "it is the Unitarian name that has the stronger pull."[92] He even claimed that Dr. Hardin in Lakeland was pushing for using just the Unitarian name, and Turrell affirmed that others agreed. This is incongruent with previous correspondences that state that Lakeland had more Universalists than Unitarians. It can point to one of two realities–that Badger and Turrell were not being truthful or that the Lakeland leadership's feelings about the Universalists had soured after not receiving financial support from the association. While we cannot know for sure what Badger's goals were regarding the Lakeland

[91] Badger, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., February 2, 1928.
[92] Badger, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., February 2, 1928.

church, his letters (in the Florida archives and in *Prophetic Sisterhood*) are an essential part of the historical puzzle because they illustrate the damaging presence of sexism and the disregard for women's missionary endeavors. They point to the harm done to relationships that once had the potential to build faith together.

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The Lakeland congregation had believed the arrival of a minister would equal church growth, but with the Depression taking hold, troubled relationships bubbling up, their vision of a vibrant liberal church crumbled. In subsequent letters, Patterson and Badger blamed Turrell. They expressed that they thought the congregation placed blame on him, as well, but this was an easy scapegoat, so they did not have to face their blatant disregard and disenfranchisement of the women working so hard to sustain the church. It may be true that Gentry held Turrell in disregard after her encounters with him and his lies about her, but Hardin's letter proved that not everyone felt the same way. After all, dismissing women's emotions was commonplace. Hardin expressed sadness about the "tragical loss" of their "very fine leader and good friend," "a very fine spirit," with "heavy hearts."[93] Somewhat mystifyingly, despite this, Turrell pointed at the people of Lakeland as if they acted outside of truth and integrity.

Were unspoken expectations on both sides to blame for a break in the relationship and the end of this attempt to grow a Liberal Religious Society in Lakeland? Was there a power struggle between Gentry, Steitz, and Turrell? Suppose the men at the associations recognized the worthiness of women's work and the competence and leadership of Gentry and Steitz and supported the Lakeland congregation financially from the beginning. Would the Lakelanders

[93] Hardin, Letter to Rev. George F. Patterson, D.D., May 7, 1928.

have been able to build strong relationships in the community that could have sustained them through the depression and an ill-fitted minister?

Although Steitz wrote a positive note about the support from the Unitarians in 1927, it became clear in 1931 that she had tired of the distracting patriarchal game being played behind the scenes while she and Gentry worked to build a church. We know that Steitz was aware of the power men had as she cleverly wrote under the pen name "Uncle Henry." It was a way to express her opinions and promote the needs of women and children in a way that people would hear. Neither woman seemed afraid to advocate assertively nor cower to men's dismissiveness. There is precedence in Universalism for this. It can be found in Judith Sargent Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes" written in 1790, or the leadership of the first female minister, Olympia Brown, ordained in 1863. While these women most likely inspired them, Gentry and Steitz were lay women who respected the position of ordained clergy. I argue, therefore, that they put limitations on the extent of power that they held themselves to lead a church. Furthermore, I argue that being rendered invisible compelled them to make passive-aggressive decisions that mystified the men, the men who seemed oblivious to the fact that their lack of integrity and relational values, indeed their preoccupation with power, was not growing churches.

Patterson wrote to Genty in April of 1929 requesting money for the remaining amount of Turrell's salary. He implored, "You will remember that it was at your urgent request wired to us that we assumed two-thirds of the burden upon the assurance that the local people in Lakeland would take care of one-third." He acknowledged that the Universalist General Convention could not make a financial contribution at the time, that the "venture was not successful," and that the depression had a tremendous economic impact. However, he still did not feel that "the local people" had "done their part." He wanted to hear from her about what they would do to fulfill

their obligation.[94] Gentry had Lewis reply. He included a short history of the Lakeland situation that briefly explained the local people's work, including forming a committee, holding business meetings, financial planning, paying guest ministers, and renting a building. He clarified that the people who had pledged to pay Turrell's salary could not do so. Either they left town or lost their money. This letter ends the archival letters for the 1920s' six-year effort to build a liberal church.

The Unitarian 1931 Attempt

Lakeland, with its fragrant citrus groves, sparkling lakes, and a sizable group of Universalists, and a few Unitarians, was not forgotten. The town offered a central location and a group of Universalists and Unitarians from which other churches could grow. And so, in 1931, the AUA undertook additional efforts to establish a church once again. Charles Joy, the Vice President of the AUA from 1930 to 1936, wrote a report for the AUA's administrative council about the Lakeland location, their local newspaper, and potential for advertising. He also mentioned Lakeland's history and failed relationship with a minister. Joy stated, "perhaps a lay organization could be created, or reinvigorated, if one still exists."[95] In this memorandum, Joy laid out a schedule for Dr. MacCarthy to speak to the Lakelanders at the beginning of March. He "had Mrs. William Steitz, Director Tourist Department of Chamber of Commerce make an application" for him to reserve the American Legion Home for the events. Steitz handled the other arrangements including booking him a room at The Terrace, a popular downtown hotel. These meetings must have been successful and fruitful, as Patterson wrote a follow-up memorandum in mid-March to Joy informing him of the next steps. Another two Unitarian

[94] George Patterson, "Letter to Mrs. Gentry," April 22, 1929, MLTS.US.3014.09, Box 6, Idaho Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[95] Charles R. Joy, Memorandum to the Administrative Council, February 2, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

ministers, Dr. W.S. Nichols and Rev. Richards, participated in a late March and early April sermon series. They were hoping to connect the nascent Lakeland community with Tampa to sustain the Lakeland group. "Indeed, this was in our minds when Turrell was there, reversed to be sure, with Lakeland as the center. But it did not work out at that time, principally because Turrell got in wrong at Lakeland."[96] Clearly, Patterson failed to see his lackadaisical attitude towards the pleas and efforts of Gentry and Steitz as a problem that contributed to the failure of the 1927 group. Perhaps if he had, he could have made amends and prevented what happened next.

On March 22, 1931, Nichols wrote to Patterson. "My first report to you in regard to Lakeland will be a disappointment. I wrote to Mrs. Steitz as you directed and announced that I would be over, and what my subject would be, and that I expected them to make the necessary arrangements." Steitz had reserved the hall, as once again requested, but according to Hardin, whom Nichols called after standing in an empty hall, no one knew he was coming. Nichols wrote to Steitz again, informing her that Richards would be there the next week to speak. He concluded that "she must have engaged the hall and then neglected to do any more about my coming, and must have been away herself. I will probably hear the explanation."[97] As identified in a review of her life, Steitz engaged in a high level of activity, so she may have been away. But, given her love for her faith and the passion with which she engaged her values in the world and worked to sustain the women's association, she unlikely failed to take action without much thought. I argue that Steitz's neglect of the situation was purposeful and born out of a deep resentment towards

[96] Patterson, George F. Memorandum to Mr. Joy, March 17, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[97] W.S. Nichols, Letter to George Patterson, March 22, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

the men of the associations who rendered her and Gentry unimportant and essentially invisible– unless it was about the money.

There were other power issues at play. Based on letters from Hardin and Mr. Godso from Lakeland, MacCarthy appointed members of the Lakeland group to positions on the board regardless of their willingness and leadership skills. In his resignation letter as the Vice President, Godso illuminated Hardin about some feelings on the part of the former group. "I am led to believe that there is some resentment felt by some of them because the former organization was not more definitely used as a nucleus for forming the new one."[98] Although he respects the feelings of these members, he cannot understand why they are "taking any exception to the manner in which Dr. MacCarthy started the new organization." His next thought hints at his insight of the situation: "The dis-satisfaction that I have heard expressed comes from a very few, but they were conspicuously active in the former movement and we need their enthusiastic support." The archives do not reflect any members more enthusiastic than Gentry and Steitz. But again, we see that their feelings are being dismissed and their work is not being fully recognized, as their names are not even mentioned. Nonetheless, Godso's letter supports the conclusion that bitter feelings on the part of Gentry and Steitz prevented them from cooperating with Patterson, Nichols, and MacCarthy.

Hardin wrote one final letter to Patterson in which he explained that MacCarthy's forceful strategy of assigning people (men, we can assume) to board roles did not go over well. He relays to him that there were hard feelings on the part of former active members. He bluntly told him that if they do form a group next season, officers should not be selected but by the local

[98] (First name illegible) Godso, Letter to Dr. E.B. Hardin, March 31, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 3, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

organization itself.[99] Patterson sent the letter to Joy, who responded with wisdom and foresight. Joy thanked him for writing so frankly, for laying out the "misunderstanding" so clearly, and offered support in the future if any Lakelanders may be interested in forming a "lay group."[100]

[99] Dr. E.B. Hardin, Letter to Dr. Patterson, Secretary, April 4, 1931, ID: MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[100] Charles R. Joy, Letter to Dr. Hardin, April 8, 1931, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

CHAPTER 2:

A NEW STRATEGY

The Fellowship Movement in Lakeland, Florida

Twenty-one years later, a group of Lakelanders expressed interest in forming a lay-led congregation. The AUA's Fellowship Movement program, the "main growth strategy of the American Unitarian Association" had been underway for five years.[1] The AUA's successful strategy was "to plant small, autonomous, lay-led congregations just about everywhere ten or more religious liberals could be brought together."[2] Patsy S. Eger led the effort to form a Unitarian fellowship in Lakeland. A former clerk at the Social Security Administration in Washington DC, Patsy had moved to Lakeland after divorcing her first husband in the 1940s and married Orville D. Eger of Auburndale, Florida in 1950. Prior to moving to Florida, Eger had been a member of All Souls Unitarian in Washington, DC from 1947 until the time around her second marriage.[3] The minister of All Souls DC, A. Powell Davies, held strong unfavorable opinions about the fellowship movement. Many clergy perceived fellowships as anti-clerical discussion groups.[4] But Davies did believe in church growth and developed a strategy to start new churches in the DC metro area by transmitting his sermons "over phone lines to suburban groups gathered around speakers."[5] This technique was successful in establishing more churches in that metropolitan area that continue to this day. Arriving in central Florida in the early 1950s,

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[1] Holley H. Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), vii.

[2] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement,* vii.

[3] Patsy Eger's 1947 Membership card emailed to me from All Souls Church, Washington, D.C. by Mara Cherkasky.

[4] Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, 163.

[5] Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, 163.

Eger encountered a much different, less cosmopolitan, and more rural area than DC. As Ulbrich identifies, "with only four Unitarian churches prior to 1948, Florida was ripe territory for the development of lay-led fellowships in the 1950s and 1960s."[6] The fellowship movement provided an opportunity for Eger to continue her religious journey with Unitarianism. Her enthusiasm for the faith, and support for the movement, is seen in her two attempts to organize a fellowship.

In March of 1952, twenty-six people interested in Unitarianism gathered at the Elks Club in hopes of forming a fellowship in Lakeland.[7] Patsy Eger, the fellowship secretary, sent by-laws and an application, co-signed by the fellowship president, Warren Scholl, to the AUA Fellowship Office.[8] The Fellowship Office approved the application, but the Lakeland group was unable to sustain momentum. A 1953 memo reflects that bad news as Munroe Husbands, the AUA's Fellowship Director, wrote "Lakeland has now gone out of business."[9]

Ellinore Dettman, who had been one of Eger's co-organizers, reflected upon this in a letter she wrote to Husbands suggesting: "When Fellowships are embryonic, make all effort to investigate the potential office-holders! Investigate financially, morally, and spiritually." Dettman was sure that if the AUA had done so, and knew more about Scholl, they would have "acted accordingly," and Lakeland would still have a "going Fellowship."[10] Yet she had also indicated in this letter that she had had a heart attack, Patsy Eger was far too busy, and Mr. Martin, the vice

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[6] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement,* 83.

[7] Penelope Pinson, "Historical Highlights: 1952-1993," one page document in the green UUCL History Folder.

[8] Patsy Eger and Warren Scholl, "Letter of Application for membership in the American Unitarian Association," April 8, 1952, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[9] Munroe Husbands, Letter to Rev. Alfred W. Hobart, May 11, 1953, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[10] Ellinore Dettman, Letter to Munroe Husbands, May 6, 1953, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

president, had moved. She expressed her hopes of re-forming a fellowship in the near future. Husbands simply replied that AUA representatives were unable to invest time in the selection of officers, and suggested that embryonic fellowships not elect permanent officers until after two or three months, so the group members could get to know one another.[11] Husbands was putting the responsibility back on the lay members, as it appears that Dettman, and perhaps others in the Lakeland group, had not fully grasped the non-hierarchical and autonomous concept of the fellowship movement–it was the lay leaders that had the power to make decisions about who they were and how they would operate, with guidance and possible financial assistance from the association. It may also reflect the sentiments of an over culture, and perhaps the unconscious doubts of the members, about the power of women to organize and lead a fellowship on their own. Did Eger and Dettman realize their own power and abilities to lead?

Laile Bartlett describes the launching of the fellowship movement by the AUA in 1947 and how the movement's philosophical organizational approach shifted power into the hands of the lay people. She argues that, "[t]he really *big* new idea was to let the local group *itself* produce what it wanted."[12] Encouraging local lay leadership to form their church was a part of the vision of Lon Ray Call, the Unitarian minister who started many churches in the United States and helped launch the fellowship program in the 1940s. "Call's ideas were considered radical in religious circles, emphasizing decentralized religious power and the assumption that Unitarianism could be whatever a congregation wanted. They implied that the nature of a congregation's worship and organization was determined by the members. The denomination had

[11] Munroe Husbands, Letter to Ellinore Dettman, May 8, 1953, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[12] Laile E. Bartlett, *Bright Galaxy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 45.

never tried such an idea."[13] This shift in power and theology was essential, but not initially obvious to its members, for the successful launch, organization, and maintenance of the Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship in Lakeland. The leadership and labor of women was prevalent and necessary, but not yet realized as central to the momentum needed to grow the fellowship.

Husbands visited Lakeland in early November 1955 and offered a presentation entitled "Who are These Unitarians?" at the Women's Club.[14] Soon after, the first meeting of the newly formed fellowship's steering committee was held, and notes indicate the committee included "persons interested in the former fellowship."[15] There were eleven people present: six women and five men. The minutes of the meeting were recorded by Eger, who had volunteered to be secretary again. At first glance, the notes might present a scenario of equal participation in the work for the fellowship, as everyone's name is included alongside their contributions. But closer analysis reveals that Eger and the other women would carry the brunt of the load: note-taking, hosting meetings at their homes, creating agendas, contacting the newspaper, and submitting publications, contacting the AUA for financial assistance, sending out letters to prospective members, offering hospitality for the initial fellowship gatherings, decorating, "arranging" the newsletter, keeping the mailing list, and ordering hymnals. Mr. Wish offered to send out the minutes to the steering committee members and write the next newspaper advertisement. Mr. Salter and Mr. Bart would find out about holding meetings at Florida Southern College (they were employed there, along with Mr. Wish). From the beginning, it is apparent that the women primarily did the nurturing, outreach, and welcoming necessary for growth.

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[13] Avery "Pete" Guest, "Lon Ray Call," *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, May 31, 2012, https://www.uudb.org/call-lon-ray/.

[14] American Unitarian Association, Announcement for Lakeland Ledger, 1955, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 40, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[15] Patsy Eger, "First Meeting of Steering Committee of Lakeland, Florida, Unitarian Fellowship," November 6, 1955, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 37, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

An additional meeting note explains that Mrs. Roberts suggested the fellowship have a "regular church service" followed by a coffee break and a discussion. "Several suggested that the service be conservative in plan and content lest we kill the Fellowship at the start," wrote Eger. An order of service, including hymns, a meditation, Biblical or "modern" readings, and an invocation, was put together. As was common in fellowships of the time, it was emphasized that no mention of offering was to be made but rather a container would be "prominently placed" at the exit door.[16] The steering committee was thoughtful in their construction of a worship service, providing balance and variety.

A second steering committee report attests to the commitment of these leaders and notes that the previously assigned tasks had been carried out. The Annie Pfeiffer Chapel at Florida Southern College (FSC) was secured as a Sunday meeting place, and the sermons of the first four meetings of the fellowship would be "confined to a definition of Unitarianism."[17] It was suggested that they use sermons already written and provided by the AUA Fellowship Office and that each member of the committee take a turn reading one, which would consequently provide gender balance. The organization of a Sunday school was postponed until the fellowship had a larger volunteer pool from which to recruit.[18]

On November 25, 1955, thirty-five people signed the membership book of the Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship (see Appendix).[19] Fifty-seven percent of the founding members were women. Bertha Steitz was one of them. Eleven married couples and thirteen people without spouses (or spouses who joined) signed. Nine of those were women, four were men. Buehrens

[16] Eger, "First Meeting of Steering Committee of Lakeland, Florida, Unitarian Fellowship."

[17] Patsy Eger, "Second Meeting of Steering Committee of Lakeland, Florida, Unitarian Fellowship," November 13, 1955, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 37, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[18] Eger, "Second Meeting of Steering Committee of Lakeland, Florida, Unitarian Fellowship."

[19] "Membership Book," Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, FL.

claims that participation in Unitarian fellowships during midcentury America "was stronger among men" and "male participation was high in Unitarian groups," but the LRUF does not follow this pattern, at least initially.[20] Braude contends that "the numerical dominance of women in all but a few religious groups constitutes one of the most consistent features of American religion."[21] The LRUF followed this broader American religious pattern in which women constituted the majority of participants. This is an important point, as the argument of this thesis is that it was women's leadership and labor that sustained the fellowship, and that the many women doing the work were more crucial to the fellowship's survival than "one man in the pulpit," or perhaps one man in the chairman's position.

Fellowships did not have ministers to begin with. They were self-organized, self-governing cultures that elected their own lay-leadership. Men were consistently put in the chairman/vice chairman positions, which may give the illusion of high male participation, contributing to the narrative that the movement was sustained because of male leadership. The story of the LRUF exists, however, because women were present. "Where women are present, religion flourishes, where they are absent, it does not," argues Braude. This is not to say that the male members of LRUF were not important characters in the story, offering significant contributions and helping to shape the LRUF's own unique fellowship culture, as no leader was unimportant in shaping events. But, if Patsy Eger had not twice begun a fellowship, had Ellinore Dettman and the other women not maintained a Sunday school for future generations, had Cleo Thomas not held the fellowship together during difficult times, there might not be a history to revisit and retell.

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[20] Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America*, 164.

[21] Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1997), 88.

Bertha Steitz, at age 72, was also one of the founding members of the Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship. Unfortunately, however, she is not mentioned in the archived meeting reports. This is not surprising given that her husband died in 1956. A fellowship member crossed her name off the membership list in 1962, which is approximately the time when she developed severe glaucoma and moved into a nursing home.[22] In the absence of records that tell of how she contributed and what relationships she had with the other founding members, we are left with many questions. What stories did she tell the people forming the Lakeland fellowship? What advice did she give the women who were leading? How did her experiences help to shape this new fellowship and support its growth? It is easy to imagine that Steitz, who lived an inspired and full life as a Universalist lay woman, was influential to the fellowship in many ways, just as she was for the entire city of Lakeland.

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The AUA approved this second fellowship start-up in February of 1956.[23] Momentum was gaining as the group established a well-planned Sunday program, outreach to potential members, and a Sunday school in the homes of two female members, including Ellinore Dettman. The fellowship adopted by-laws and a covenant of membership: "Love is the spirit of this Fellowship and service is its law. In freedom of truth we unite for the worship of God and the service to man."[24] As noted in a 1957 document, they were decidedly not theist or humanist, as the group discerned they "could not afford to be extreme in either direction."[25] Meeting notes and correspondences between members indicate that low attendance and participation may have

[22] Bair, "Columnist Not What He Seemed to Be."

[23] Munroe Husbands, Letter to Patsy Eger, February 13, 1956, MLTS.US.3014.09. Box 6, Florida Congregational Records, Meadville Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.

[24] "Membership Book," Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, FL.

[25] Unauthored Meeting Notes, January 6, 1957, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 1, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

influenced the decision to be theologically flexible. Eger reported a membership of thirty-four at the 1958 annual meeting, and there was a concerned mood about the shrinking membership apparent in the letters and notes of that spring season, before the fellowship was to take its summer break. Problem-solving strategies included inviting friends, planning social time, advertising, and raising funds for a minister. "[W]e are pledging ourselves to finance a minister," Eger noted in an April meeting.[26] The members discussed creating a balanced program, outlining three methods: "as between men and women speakers; as between original and read sermons; as between our own members and guest speakers."[27] In this strive for balance, the fellowship's identity surfaced through the expression of their desires. While they continued to maintain that they wanted (or rather needed to increase membership) a minister, it is apparent that they desired diversity– in topic, experience, theology, and gender. By 1959, membership increased to fifty-five. In 1960, the Charter of the Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship, Inc. was submitted to the State of Florida and was signed by three women: Ellinore Dettman, Patsy Eger, and Dorothea Garber.

The longevity of the women's commitment to their religious work is significant when assessing the impact women had on sustaining the fellowship. While the man who filled the Chairman position (with the exception of George Gerlach from 1968 to 1973) changed each year, Eger provided constant support as the secretary for four years. Dettman, with other women, organized the Sunday school and taught the fellowship's children for ten years. They had 30 registered children by 1959.[28] As Braude explains, "women have made religious institutions

[26] Patsy Eger, Lake Region Fellowship Business Meeting, April 6, 1958, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 40, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[27] Hale Orrell, Letter to the Program Committee, April 16, 1958, ID: 903, Box 4, Folder 40, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[28] Patsy Eger, Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship Annual Meeting, March 27, 1960, ID: 903, Box 1, Folder 1, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

possible by providing audiences for preaching, participants for rituals, the material and financial support for religious buildings, and, perhaps most important, by inculcating faith in their children to provide the next generation of participants."[29] Once they were able to get it off the ground, the LRUF considered the Sunday School program to be of primary importance. Even when Dettman was ready to give up her position as superintendent, she remained until someone else could take it over, signifying her commitment to sustaining this program, essential to attracting families, essential to sustaining the life of the fellowship. What might have happened had she not been so committed? And how did her relationships with the other women in the congregation support her ability to endure?

When the fellowship meeting notes begin to reflect that Eger and Dettman are ready to transfer some of their work to others in the fellowship, we see a problem arise. As often happens, the people in leadership positions subsume the responsibilities of the work not being done or the work that needs to be done. In this case, that would be the chairman and vice chairman. But most of the time, with one exception in 1958 of a woman filling the vice chair position, the people in the chairman and vice chairman positions were men, which was the case in 1959.[30]

The 1959 Annual Meeting notes reflect that the existing members, including the founding women, were tiring out. We have already begun to see less of Eger in the records, just occasionally as a "recording secretary," or the person who contacts the AUA. Dettman requested that they search for another Sunday School Superintendent. The March 1959 Annual Meeting notes state that they were "unable to complete...business because the nominating committee had found no candidates available to serve as chairman and vice chairman."[31] A special meeting

[29] Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," 89.

[30] Unauthored report for Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship, March 29, 1959, ID: 903, Box 1, Folder 1, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[31] Unauthored report for Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship.

would be held in April at which they would consider hiring an executive secretary, "since the crux of the problem of getting someone to assume the chairmanship is the ever-increasing amount of detailed work required as the fellowship grows."[32] The nominating committee proposed that a paid part-time executive secretary be employed. "Candidates for chairman and vice chairman have consented to serve if a paid executive secretary is hired to do the bulk of the chores." This conundrum should give us pause, not because it is unusual to have to pay someone to perform administrative work, but because naming the work of the church as "the chores" continues to invisiblize the important work that women did to grow and sustain a church. That two men did fill the chair and vice-chair positions that year after a woman was hired to do "the chores" speaks loudly to the fact that traditional gender roles were not yet dismantled in this fellowship's culture.

Cleo E. Thomas, "Tommie"

Cleo E. Thomas, better known as "Tommie," signed the membership book on March 29, 1959, at 71 years of age. She was immediately hired as the Executive Secretary in the April special meeting. Tommie was the first woman to be paid by the church. She was a member and the first regular employee. Tommie had a calling to build community inside and outside of the church walls. She engaged in a wide variety of tasks and activities, many that were outside of her job description.

Tommie found herself as the leader of a fellowship at a crossroads. Not only did they need fresh, energized leadership, they needed to find a new place to meet. In 1960, Dr. Spivey, the president of FSC, retired. A new president, Dr. Charles T. Thrift, Jr., began his term. Thrift

[32] Unauthored report for Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship.

told the group they could no longer meet on the FSC campus.[33] This set Tommie up for a challenge. Finding a new home for the fellowship to meet at was only loosely part of Tommie's job description, which included "arranging for speakers, writing the weekly news bulletins, press releases and advertisement, preparing the Sunday order of service programs, conducting correspondence, doing 'parish work,' and generally 'riding herd' on no end of organizational matters."[34] However, she gladly took this task on, as she considered her title more appropriately termed as "jack-of-all-trades." She began a search of the city.

As far as the archives reflect, Tommie was the only one determined to find a new place for the fellowship to meet, one that included a space for the Sunday School. Tommie wrote in a 1978 letter to the South West Florida District Officials referring to herself in 1960 that "this reporter, being relatively free, with a good car, and in appreciation for her first church home after a fruitless search of many years, assumed the responsibility of trying to find a place we could call home for at least another season. Countless miles were covered, investigating every two-story house for rent or purchase, abandoned schools and churches, warehouses, etc."[35] As Ulbrich explains, one of the "birthing pains" that new Fellowships experience is finding a suitable meeting space, and Tommie took on the full burden of this important task.[36] As Tommie went out in search of property, she was searching a bustling small city surrounded by agricultural land where not many buildings were sitting empty. Tommie, empowered by the structure of lay leadership, was able to use her perseverance towards successful ends. She not only found the

[33] Cleo E. Thomas, Letter to South West Florida District Officials, March 24, 1975, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 9, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[34] Unauthored report for Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship.

[35] Thomas, Letter to South West Florida District Officials.

[36] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 16.

property, but also inquired with the real estate company about its cost, wrote a proposal to the fellowship board, and coordinated the securing of funds from members and the AUA.[37]

Tommie's notes are consistently detailed and meticulous recordings of fellowship business. But they are not just business notes–they are also reflections. Tommie recorded the stories of her life through her work with and for the fellowship. Her reflections let us peer into her feelings. She was proud of the work she did. Her work brought her joy and she was grateful for it. But she also wrote with humility, not giving herself enough credit for being the leader who sustained the fellowship during a difficult time. She recalled her experience of finding the property in a 1975 letter:

> 3140 Troy Ave., a previous private school, was found for sale at $6,700 CASH. The Board of Trustees was quickly called...This reporter, with years of experience in the business world, a new-comer to The Fellowship, felt about two-inches tall with all of the old-timers like the Orrells, the Dettmans and Roy Eichleay. But I had done my 'home-work' carefully, and somehow convinced them that it was the golden opportunity we had been looking for. We had a bank balance of $300.[38]

Without Tommie's vision and efforts, it is uncertain whether the fellowship would have survived. The notes and reports in the archives dated for a few years after the finding of this new location reflect a community that came together. Finding a new home renewed their spirits and the people of the fellowship put in the physical work required to fix up the buildings and make it suitable for a small religious group. The members also expressed appreciation for Tommie and the work that she did. In a correspondence that Tommie had with the Van Buskirk's in 1960, Mr. Van Buskirk wrote to Tommie that "if the fellowship stays together, it's because of you."[39]

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[37] Thomas, "History of: Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship, Inc." in the UUCL Green Folder, May 1975.

[38] Thomas, Letter to South West Florida District Officials.

[39] Mr. and Mrs. VanBuskirk, Letter to Cleo E. Thomas, September 1960, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 2, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

Tommie found the new property, but more importantly, she gathered people together and inspired them to take action.

In 1961, Tommie's husband fell ill. He passed away soon after and Tommie resigned as the Executive Secretary. A few other women in the congregation volunteered to attend to some of Tommie's assigned, and self-assigned, tasks. However, Tommie stayed involved. She volunteered in 1964-67 as the Program Chair, tasked with finding Sunday speakers. She attempted to resign her position as the UN/UUA Envoy and the Social Responsibilities Chair in 1968, but no one else was willing to take it over, so she continued in that position.[40] In an April 1969 Board Report, Tommie noted that she had been volunteering for the local chapter of the Human Relations Council of Florida. She was a liaison during her "non-working" years between this council and the Fellowship, encouraging local interracial and intercultural relationships.[41] This work points to Tommie's dedication to social justice and building community with the larger Polk County community. This aspect of Tommie's leadership strongly resonates with Steitz's work in the world. Both women were called by their faith to nurture community relationships to make the world a more loving and just place.

As the 1960s proceeded, and the country's anxiety was heightened by the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Civil Rights Movement, the UUA was experiencing conflict with the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus and the Liberal Religious Youth movement. These conflicts resonated throughout the congregations, including the LRUUF. Tensions were increasing in the Fellowship because of conflicts in the youth program, and otherwise. Tommie's absence as the "Executive Secretary" must have been deeply felt for, as she writes upon re-entering the life of

[40] Cleo E. Thomas, Report to Board of Trustees, August 8, 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[41] Cleo E. Thomas, Report of the Executive Secretary, Board of Trustees Meeting, April 3, 1969, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

the fellowship full-time, the members were already reinstating her small salary of $60 per month ($542 in 2024) before she could even say "yes."[42]

A letter that Tommie wrote in the summer of 1968 to George Gerlach reflects her own concern about returning to her position as executive secretary during this anxious time when members had been resigning and an overwhelming amount of work needed to be done to repair the community. At the April Annual Meeting, the congregation elected Gerlach as President of the Board of Trustees. He would remain in that position for the next five years, the longest any member would stay in that position in the history of this congregation.[43] "The fact that you will lead the Fellowship for the 1968-69 season is the one BRIGHT, BRIGHT SPOT on the horizon. And if I am able to make a contribution, it will only be because of your sitting in the President's chair," Tommie professed to Gerlach. She assured him that she did not need to be paid, but one member had already slid a check under her door while she was out for dinner, an action that attests to a fellowship need and respect for Tommie's leadership.[44] "This note is to pledge to follow your leadership and give you the very best support and mechanical assistance I know," she wrote to Gerlach. She informed him of the work she has been asked to do–the office work (including "getting the files in order"), finding Sunday speakers/programming, and somehow attending to the Sunday School program, as Tommie was waiting for the file from the previous Superintendent, Ellinore Dettman, who was not able to transfer that responsibility to anyone else over the previous eight years. She also mentions needing to "study some of the current material, so much has happened this spring and summer, which is new."[45]

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[42] Cleo E. Thomas, Letter to George Gerlach, July 10, 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[43] Joyce Bode, "Historical Highlights, 1952-1994," ID: 903, Box 5, Folder 13, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[44] Thomas, Letter to George Gerlach, July 10, 1968.

[45] Thomas, Letter to George Gerlach, July 10, 1968.

Many of Tommie's notes and reports in the archives indicate that she was purposefully aware and interested in what was going on with the AUA/UUA, always wanting to stay connected with the other congregations in the regional cluster and participating in ways that were in line with the Association's endeavors. When she stated that she needed to read "current material," she was referring not only to congregational notes, but also information from the Southwest Florida Region and the Association. In her August 1968 Board Meeting report as the officially reinstated paid Executive Secretary, she stated "I need to be informed on the new area organization, Orlando and the West Coast, and will ask Dick Kruse to bring me up to date."[46] This is interesting in light of Ulbrich's statement that, "at the heart of the fellowship story," an uneasy relationship existed between the institutional and the anti-institutional.[47] Tommie's pro-UUA approach nurtured positive feelings towards the national association, despite what the overall trends of fellowships were at the time. She proudly wrote in her 1971 letter to fellowship members, "we can pay our denominational assessment, which keeps us in touch with every other society in the U.S."[48] She consistently reported on UUA initiatives and wrote about how she spent hours reading mail from them to get new ideas. Tommie listed all the UU district organizations and churches that sent newsletters and stated that the UUA in Boston sent a large monthly packet, all of which she "searched for new ideas, new ways of doing the regular things which will help our Fellowship to grow and be more meaningful to our members and friends."[49]

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[46] Cleo E. Thomas, Report to Board of Trustees, August 8, 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[47] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 32.

[48] Cleo E. Thomas, Letter to Membership, May 1971, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 7, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[49] Cleo E. Thomas, Annual Meeting Report of the Executive Secretary, March 9, 1969, ID: 903, Box 1, Folder 1, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

Tommie's work, guided by her vision, went beyond that of the mechanical work of an Executive Secretary.

Tommie was also attentive to the work of the Black Affairs Council (BAC). In fact, the Fellowship donated $250 to the UUA in both 1968 and 1969, specifically indicating that it was a contribution for the BAC.[50] In her September 1968 Program Committee report she wrote that "January is 'Brotherhood Month' in the UUA calendar. "This will be our theme, presenting four speakers from other faiths, other races."[51] In her May 8, 1969 report, she described the events at the Southeastern District conference, including having attended a talk by Heywood Henry and others.[52]

Just one month back to work, Tommie gave an update to the congregation in her board report regarding all that she had been working on. She made a "plea for tolerance" as "wearing 'two-Top-Hats' with so much to be done in three weeks is not a happy prospect." In reality, she was attending to her role as Executive Secretary, and to that of five committees. Yet, she remained optimistic, inspiring the fellowship toward community building and welcoming new people. "My goal is to fill the chapel to standing room only. I'll need the help of each of you."[53]

In this report about the first few weeks she has returned to work, Tommie reflects with hope, enthusiasm, determination, and vision. Alongside her business administration and organizational skills, Tommie, then 80 years old, had enough energy to follow through on many of the problem-solving ideas she and others had. She was aware that the fellowship began to

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[50] Copy of "1968-1969 UUA Annual Fund Commitment," Signed by LRUUF Treasurer, JL Clague, October 3, 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[51] Cleo E. Thomas, Report: Program Committee, September 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[52] Cleo E. Thomas, Report of Administrative Secretary, May 8, 1969, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 6, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

[53] Cleo E. Thomas, Report to Board of Trustees, August 8, 1968, ID: 903, Box 8, Folder 5, Lakeland Public Library Archives, Lakeland, FL.

crumble in her absence. People had burned out, were leaving, and the Sunday School that helped fuel the beginning of the fellowship had lost momentum. Perhaps, in Tommie's absence and without her leadership, the Fellowship developed some negative characteristics that Ulbrich mentions in her book: "chaotic, resistant to authority and structure, and opposed to growth."[54] Tommie entered a system in turmoil with a non-anxious presence. Her approach was one of humility and collaboration. She was transparent by recording all the vast array of tasks she had been doing. She gathered the opinions and ideas of others by inviting them in. She put effort into cultivating relationships of trust. This corresponds with the ways in which Ulbrich describes the women who helped shape the fellowship movement: "Many of these women brought to their work a style that was neither authoritarian nor anarchic."[55] Tommie implicitly understood that the only way forward was through the sharing of responsibility for the fellowship by the members of the Fellowship. She laid down the foundations for the patterns of shared ministry to emerge and continue. The Congregation's records in the archives demonstrate that Tommie was less like a secretary and more like the ministers that Ulbrich mentions, the ones who were eventually called into Fellowship congregations and were "less an authority figure and more a coach, a mentor, a source of empowerment and enrichment for the congregation's ministries."[56] Tommie stepped into both the prophetic and the pastoral realms of lay ministry.

The fellowship movement flattened traditional church hierarchy and allowed for a do-it-yourself culture. It empowered lay leaders, and with that, the work that women had been doing raised to the surface, becoming the catalyst for growth, and providing staying power through the connection-making process that came naturally. Tommie centered relationships, recognizing that

[54] Holley H. Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), 29.

[55] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 115.

[56] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 115.

building relationships with newcomers, people of other faiths and races, and other community organizations was central to a thriving church. This is still talked about today by the two remaining long-time members at UUCL.

It is interesting to circle back to Tommie's humble commitment to Gerlach–that she pledged to give him "the very best support" and "mechanical assistance" that she knew. Certainly, Gerlach, who delivered sermons and chaired the Board, did his part to lead the fellowship. I wonder, however, if this was heavily sustained by Tommie–by her vision, her encouragement, and her work. Perhaps Tommie is the reason that Gerlach served in this capacity for five years, especially during a tumultuous period of time for the fellowship, the UUA, and the country. To say that she will give him "the very best support" is adequate and truthful, but to use the words "mechanical assistance" to describe her work diminished the work that she did to sustain the growing fellowship, building relationships inside and outside the community. Did Tommie truly perceive her work as only "mechanical assistance" or did she feel called to this work but wasn't sure how to recognize that calling given the scarcity of female religious professionals? Was this humility a part of her non-authoritarian approach that allowed her to do the work of shared ministry, shaping this fellowship? Is this internalized sexism? Was she aware of her own power?

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In 1972, the congregation created the "Tommie Award." This award was given to a person, often someone in the greater Lakeland community, in recognition of their social justice work. It was named after Tommie because the congregation recognized how important her social justice work was to the congregation.[57] For over forty years, the award was given out yearly by

[57] Penelope Pinson, "Historical Highlights: 1952-1993," one page document in the green UUCL History Folder.

the congregation. Will the true story about this award be told and absorbed into the congregation's collective memory? How can the congregation be shaped by this work that Tommie, and the other women, did to sustain Unitarian Universalism in Lakeland?

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to examine the history of Unitarian Universalism in Lakeland, Florida with a focus on its roots in the fellowship movement, a growth strategy in midcentury America. Through a study of archived documents, newspaper articles, denominational and congregational records, my research uncovered a new version of Lakeland's history of Unitarian Universalism and points to the same possibility in other congregational histories.

Women's leadership was central to the unfolding and growth of Unitarianism and Universalism in Lakeland. The fellowship movement helped empower women when previous growth efforts resisted women's leadership and at times openly thwarted it. The fellowship movement made space for and legitimized their leadership. In turn, women contributed to the growth of the movement. Ann Braude's claim, "where women are present, religion flourishes," is true in the history of Unitarian Universalism in Lakeland.[1] This history highlights the ways women's leadership was essential for, ultimately, the success of the movement. It also showed the ways that sexism slowed down and at times stopped the growth of Universalism and Unitarianism in Lakeland. How would other congregational histories change with an investigation into women's lay leadership?

When presenting a women's religious history, it is essential to recognize that white Protestant women in early America, including Universalists, found a liberating theological message in their Christian faith that called to the full humanity of women. While the church patriarchy recognized this from a theological perspective, they continued to disenfranchise

[1] Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1997), 88.

women from positions of power. As Ann Braude avers, "in assessing women's involvement in religion, we should not limit our perception of power to those forms that are publicly recognized within religious institutions."[2] Women formed their own missionary societies, clubs, and organizations to meet their religious and civic goals. Gentry and Steitz joined the Women's Universalist Missionary Association and learned the skills necessary to support fledgling communities and mission work.[3] It is important, therefore, to connect the lives of Gentry and Steitz to the history of the Universalist women's associations to assist in contextualizing the work the Lakeland women were doing.

The first national meeting of the Women's Universalist Missionary Association was held in 1870. Initially, Universalist women's associations were established for the purposes of fundraising for the "denomination's common good," assisting Universalist churches with buildings and minister salaries. They were so effective at fundraising that they soon joined interdenominational women's missionaries to do work abroad and the Universalist General Convention's endeavors on world-wide missions, most notably in Japan.[4] By the end of the 19th century, state level women's associations were formed, however there was not a Florida state association.[5] Steitz and Gentry formed a local Lakeland chapter, as the newspaper ads reveal, but whether or not it was connected to or supported by The Women's National Missionary Association of The Universalist Church is unknown. Insight into this history of the national Universalist women's associations prompts perplexing questions. If they were adept at supporting nascent fellowships, why didn't Gentry and Steitz turn to them for funding, especially since they were connected to the women's associations already? Or, was the one thousand dollars

[2] Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," 91.
[3] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women 1869 to 1955," 7.
[4] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women 1869 to 1955," 12-14.
[5] "A Brief History of the Work of Universalist Women 1869 to 1955," 13.

from the local Lakeland people mostly from the local WUMA chapter that Gentry and Steitz formed? The WNMAUC did partner with the Universalist General Convention, so it may be that this pattern set an expectation of partnering–if Gentry and Steitz had done work in fundraising for a local church through their women's association, then the General Convention should contribute as well. It is also possible that the local Lakeland association was small and not as effective at fundraising as other women's groups in the Midwest and Northeast, especially if Florida lacked a state branch. Perhaps future researchers can locate additional archival documents between Steitz, Gentry, and other branches of the Universalist women's associations which could be instrumental in determining why funding from them did not make it to Lakeland.

Nevertheless, if we reframe our understanding of where to find religion and how women manifest it differently, we can see that Universalism thrived through the ongoing contributions and leadership of Gentry and Steitz. Braude contends, "the meaning of a faith resides with those who enact it as much as with those who preach it."[6] We see Steitz enacting her faith–by bringing people together and building relationships through her writing. We see her faith in action through her leadership and participation in women's clubs, libraries, social work, and even by enthusiastically welcoming tourists to the city. She personified the ethical and spiritual nature of Universalism as Olympia Brown so eloquently described it in 1920 as promoting "the worth of the human being fashioned in the image of God…entitled to the opportunities of life, worthy of respect, and requiring an atmosphere of justice and liberty for his development."[7] Steitz, whose worldview was molded by her Universalist faith, was motivated to create this atmosphere in her own city of Lakeland. In the absence of a Florida state chapter of a Universalist women's

[6] Ann Braude, "Faith, Feminism, and History," in *The Religious History of American Women*, ed. Catherine Brekus (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 249, Kindle.

[7] Olympia Brown, "The Opening Doors, 1920" in *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism,* vol. 2, *From 1900 to the Present*, ed. Dan McKanan (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017), 73.

missionary association, she still served the vision of their work. How did her enacted spirituality influence others?

There are no records in the Lakeland archival material that indicate what Steitz's relationship was with Eger and Dettman and the other people who began the fellowship. Given what we know about Steitz, we can only imagine that she formed meaningful relationships with them and told inspiring stories about living her faith. Perhaps she told the stories of conflict rooted in sexism that stunted the growth of liberal religion in Lakeland. We can imagine that Steitz experienced joy as the fellowship began and fully supported the women working to get it off the ground. We should not underestimate the power of a woman with a powerful and prophetic vision and her ability to motivate others. Steitz, and Gentry, too, had prophetic vision. This study has identified Gentry and Steitz as the central leaders in the Universalist story in Lakeland, and their prophetic vision was the main ingredient needed to bring people together. Their persistence and determination can inspire us now to keep Unitarian Universalism thriving in Lakeland, no matter the barriers that are set before us.

This case study also showed that when Eger came to town, she was a Unitarian. Empowered by the fellowship movement to lead, she organized others and they established the fellowship. As Ulbrich explains, fellowships "made room for more women in positions of leadership…Many of these women brought to their work a style that was neither authoritarian nor anarchic."[8] This sort of leadership set a precedent for shared ministry throughout fellowships, and it was present when Eger and Dettman started the fellowship. They recorded meeting notes that reflected their thoughtfulness about worship services, how to promote the fellowship, where to meet and when, when to start a Sunday school, and even what sort of theology they should

[8] Holley H. Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and Its Legacy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), 115.

embrace. Everyone contributed in some way. Eger's notes show that there was organization and follow-up action.

Tommie exemplified the kind of non-authoritative leadership that promoted a shared ministry. Although she did so much of the work herself, she regularly went to others in the fellowship for ideas and opinions. She did not control the events of the fellowship, but rather helped shape them according to the desires and characteristics of the people in the fellowship. Additionally, parallels can be drawn between Steitz's embodied faith, and Tommie's, and the ways they showed up in the world. Like Steitz, Tommie built relationships outside of the congregation that helped fuel her vision. She diligently kept track of what was going on in the larger association, she attended numerous regional cluster meetings, and she worked with the Human Relations Council to strengthen race relations. She gave shape to her Unitarian values in the way she lived her life. The relationships she built outside of the congregation supported her vision of growing the fellowship, in numbers and with the values of the Unitarian faith. Tommie's vision was contagious. It still lives in the remaining members who knew her. It lives in the giving of the Tommie Award. The history that accompanies the award, which lifts up Tommie's work, her embodied faith, and her vision for a flourishing fellowship, needs to be remembered by the current UUCL. Without this accompanying ethical and spiritual nature that emphasizes its meaning, the giving of the award falls flat and loses significance. Already, the congregation has inadvertently skipped awarding it in recent years, partially due to the disruption the pandemic caused, but also because the new leaders in the congregation are not well aware of UUCL's history. This history, a women's history that sheds light on the significance of Tommie's work, can revitalize the award and support the development of closer relationships with the

larger Lakeland community, as Tommie had envisioned. Unitarian Universalism can continue to grow and impact the community in which it lives.

I argue that the fellowship movement empowered women, and women empowered the movement, and consequently, grew the faith. The UUCL is one of seventeen churches in Florida that began with the fellowship movement, and one of forty-three congregations in total for the state.[9] But it is not just numbers we should be concerned with; we need to also consider the quality of our faith. Women, with a history of disenfranchisement from the hierarchy of the church, developed particular beliefs and ways to lead. They formed missionary groups that aimed to grow the faith, improve the life of others, and that nurtured their own relationships and ways of believing and living.

Unitarian Universalism today reflects the ethical and spiritual nature of the women who helped it flourish. The UUA, through the work of the Article II Study Commission, endeavors to embrace pluralism, generosity, interdependence, equity, justice, and transformation as core values. While not explicitly stated, these values were woven into the work that Gentry and Steitz were doing–the missionary work that they perceived God called them to; Steitz's urgings for prison reform and literacy; Gentry's persistence to build a church here for all the interested families. Unitarian Universalists hold love at their center, just as the women who brought this faith to Lakeland did. The very presence of women who have embodied their faith points to how instrumental women have been in shaping the ethical and spiritual characteristics of this faith.

Fluker reminds us that "Remembering our stories offers entree into forgotten worlds of meaning that allow recovery of dismembered bodies of experience otherwise invisible to consciousness."[10] The members of the UUCL will continue to tell stories about themselves. The

[9] Ulbrich, *The Fellowship Movement*, 83.
[10] Fluker, *Ethical Leadership*, 168.

stories will shape beliefs and outcomes. Therefore, the stories should be grounded in as accurate a history as possible of the people, relationships, and events that came before us. As an aspiration, no parts of our story should be "dismembered." Fluker stresses the importance of remembering our stories not just for wholeness, but for integrity.[11] The written accounts of Unitarianism in Lakeland, and the Universalist movement of the early twentieth century that happened here before it, have been important entry ways into UUCL's past, but the story has needed to be fleshed out and remembered from a woman's perspective to ensure we honor the impact of women's prophetic visions and relationship building work. How can we be a community of integrity–one that includes the unique gifts and embodied faith experiences of all involved–without it?

What sort of religious community can UUCL transform into once the work of women is perceived fully as essential and legitimate? What can it look like when we have reconciled our past differences, understanding how sexism diminished, or completely blocked women's work? Through the reconstruction of a narrative that treats women as equals, yet recognizes how their leadership has been different, we can provide a stronger sense of belonging to the women who come into the community seeking empowerment for their spiritual calling. Can this task of remembering give us the awareness to do better for those individuals struggling against being disenfranchised in our faith and from power structures in the larger culture, namely those who identify as trans, gender queer, nonbinary, or gender fluid?

Ann Braude argues that American religious history is women's history. Therefore, as we continue to examine the history of the fellowship movement as a growth strategy in locations across the country, it will be necessary to uncover and retell the histories of the women lay

[11] Walter Earl Fluker, *Ethical Leadership* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 167.

leaders engaged in the movement. Were there unsuccessful previous attempts to start a church by women before the fellowship movement? Who were the people that started fellowships? How does gender shape our historical analyses? How will this help us gain deeper insight into the characteristics of fellowships–whether perceived as positive or not–and their influence on the culture of Unitarian Universalism? Does women's leadership look different, producing different results, in our Unitarian Universalist histories? "After all, women were more than men who bore children and tended the hearth; that is, women were more than the socioeconomic roles and legal restrictions that bound their lives" explains historian Marilyn J. Westerkamp. She poses important questions for future research: "Was there some commonality in women's experiences that set them apart, as a group, from men? More important, when women and men shared common theologies and experiences, did their culture and ideology cause them to comprehend and respond to similar stimuli in different ways?"[12] The literature review presented in this thesis reveals that there is a lack of deep and extensive research on local fellowship histories that contribute to a nuanced look at gender, sexism, hierarchy, and church growth in the fellowship movement. This thesis suggests that more research on this topic can contribute to our knowledge of women's history as American religious history and can support a better understanding of how women's leadership is different and why.

[12] Westerkamp, Marilyn J., "Puritan Women, Spiritual Power, and the Question of Sexuality," in *The Religious History of American Women*, ed. Catherine Brekus (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 57, Kindle.

APPENDIX A:

FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE LAKE REGION UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP[1]

Mrs. Carl Dettman
Paul S Patterson
Susan C Patterson
Dorothy Rowe
Ralph B Rowe
Dorothea F Garber
Elaine Bart
Roger Bart
Mrs. Julian Martinez
Mr. Julian Martinez
Mrs. O. D. "Patsy" Eger
Barbara Erwin
Elaine Smithers
Harold Smithers
Lola S Bracken
Hester R Hempstead
Joseph L Hempstead
Ouida Salter
Wesley Clarence Salter
Retta M Wish
Fred D Wish Jr
Bertha H Steitz
Dale W Mathias
Margerita Eichleay
Roy O Eichleay
Chris Camden
Howard Camden
Mary Hostetter
Chris Hostetter
Jessica Price
Jane Savage
George Lees
John D Rowland
Warren Scholl
Mildred Robert

[1] "Membership Book," Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, FL.

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