

June 1, 2005 marks the 180<sup>th</sup> year since the founding of the New York State Convention of Universalists. What follows is a brief history of that organization.

Enthusiastic converts to the new faith of Universalism in America, mostly from New England but also from Palantine Germany, had begun settling in the wilderness of New York state by 1803. The earliest society was founded that year at Fly Creek in Otsego County, and others appeared quickly. While the believers were very eager to spread the good news of their faith, they were not so eager to accept the necessity for governance inherent in the building of what had become a new American denomination. In 1825 the New York State Convention of Universalists came into existence to meet this need. Previously it had been known as the Western Association, created in 1805 as the "others" contingent of the General Convention of the New England States and Others. But by 1823 the denomination in New York had grown to 50 societies, and the process of establishing an autonomous governing body in the state began moving forward in earnest.

However, empowering this formal structure proved to be a slow and contentious process. Early Universalist societies in New York State had begun managing their affairs through their respective Associations, one level above the local congregation, and they trusted only these Associations in any matter of governance. Even more than other Universalists, those in New York harbored a general suspicion of organization in and of itself, and were unwilling to surrender the prerogatives of their Associations, such as granting fellowship (the right to preach in the state as a Universalist), making judgments about clergy discipline issues — including the decision to disfellowship a minister — and conferring ordination. Only after much wrangling had all of the state Associations finally joined the Convention by

1845 and begun allowing it to begin functioning effectively.

Originally the New York Convention was designed mainly to exist as a bond of union between the state Associations, to promote the welfare of Universalism, to supply the means for problem resolution, and to consider new candidates for the ministry. Not until 1836 did the Convention assert the authority to confer ordination. That same year it also claimed the right to issue letters of fellowship. However, the determined opposition of the Associations convinced the Convention to retract this claim. The Convention held the powers of ordination and governance until 1961. That year the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association merged to create the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), and the new organization then assumed those powers.

During the nineteenth century, major Convention activities included helping establish and support two new educational institutions, publishing a newspaper, and administering a clergy relief fund. One of these educational endeavors, the Clinton Liberal Institute (CLI), was founded at Clinton in 1831. Originally it was a school for young men considering the ministry, but a "female department" was also operated there. The Institute came under the authority of the Convention in 1855 and mostly served the general Universalist population, first at Clinton and then at Fort Plain from 1879 until the school's destruction by fire in 1900. The Canton Theological School at St. Lawrence University in Canton opened in 1858. Known to its supporters as "the candle in the wilderness" — and to its opponents as "the dung heap on the hill" — the school survived many major difficulties during its existence to carry out its mission of educating individuals for the Universalist ministry. The Convention held legal responsibility for both the theological school and the CLI until

1910. Financial support to the School continued until its closure in 1965.

The weekly newspaper the *Christian Ambassador* was originally the private enterprise of a succession of prominent New York clergymen. But by 1850 it had become such an important tool of denominational communication — and such an impossible expense to manage — that the following year the Convention took over its ownership and publication until its merger with the *Christian Leader* in 1868. Along with their predecessors and their competitors, the *Ambassador* and the *Leader* are now priceless history resources.

The Harsen Relief Fund administered by the Convention was created in 1838 with a large bequest from a devoted New York City Universalist and was originally designated for indigent ministers of the faith. In 1919 it was converted to the current service gratuity fund which was available both to retired ministers and to the spouses of deceased clergy who met established residence requirements at the time of their application. The Convention capped its century of labor with the founding in 1894 of the Women's Missionary Society.

Moving into the twentieth century, the Convention was faced with a precipitous, ongoing decline of Universalism and the increasingly frequent closing of local congregations. As a result it found itself the owner of a growing inheritance of real estate in the form of church buildings and parsonages. To administer the funds derived from the sale of these closed churches, the Convention placed them in its safekeeping for twenty years, during which time a new congregation opening in the same area could reclaim the money. But few congregations were ever formed that could take advantage of this benefit.

The Convention's small periodical *The Convention at Work*, begun in 1890, was renamed *The Empire State Universalist* in

1913 and was continued under that name for 50 more years. In 1951 the Convention purchased a former summer residence on Beaver Lake as a retreat center which in 1966 became the popular camp known as Unirondack. The Convention began making its substantial yearly contributions to the two new UUA districts, St. Lawrence and Metro, as soon as they were created after merger. It hired professional consultants to help manage its finances. To increase interest in and attendance at its annual meetings, it began offering keynote addresses and varied workshops. And to foster the continuing growth of Unitarian Universalism, in 1988 it created the current Grants and Loans program, which is open to all UU congregations in the state.

During the 1990's the Board voted to turn the service gratuity funds of the Convention over to the UUA, but this plan was rejected by the Convention membership. The Board also sponsored forums on the Convention's future, drafted updated mission, vision, and financial policy statements, invited congregations outside its membership to host its annual meetings, and pondered how the usefulness of these meetings could be expanded in the future. And the year 1993 saw the publication of the adult study course *Remembering Universalism into Life* co-authored by Rev. Ray Naseman and Rev. Elizabeth Strong, based on a collection of keynote addresses titled *The Universalist Heritage*.

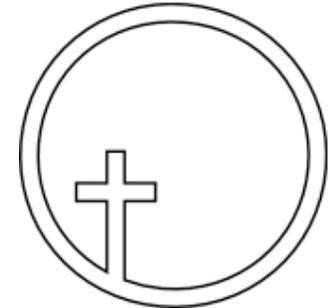
This new century commenced with a Board retreat in 2001 to determine the Convention's future. In 2003 the Board adopted an updated investment policy, along with principles in support of Socially Responsible Investing. During that same year it commissioned an art poster featuring several symbols from the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston, MA, which are the foundation of religious symbolism in use in Unitarian Universalism today. And with the assistance of

many other individuals, the archivist is now compiling a database of every known Universalist congregation founded in New York State between 1803 and 1961.

Since 1862 the Convention has been legally chartered by the state as a religious corporation. From its beginning, its business has been conducted by officers of a Council or Board operating under approved bylaws and with authorized delegates voting at annual meetings. Before the merger in 1961, delegates were elected by their respective Associations. Since that time they have been appointed or elected by their member congregations. The Convention's present membership consists of twenty-two of the surviving heritage Universalist congregations that belonged when the membership roster was closed following merger. The Annual Meeting in 2004 will consider a proposal to permit additional congregations to petition for membership.

No longer an institution of governance, this body now functions in grant and loan distribution, service gratuity management, and support for innovative programs promoting the growth of Unitarian Universalism, primarily in New York State. With its inheritance of financial resources, and its policies of managing this legacy with both financial expertise and moral conscientiousness, the Convention is poised to serve its Unitarian Universalist constituency far into the future.

# **History of the New York State Convention of Universalists 1825-2005**



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