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Rev. Dr. Frederick W. Betts Dies at 74;
Civic Leader and Crusader 42 Years
Universalist Pastor Suffered Breakdown Year Ago

Dr. Frederick W. Betts, pastor of the First Universalist Church, reform crusader, civic leader and one of the community's outstanding citizens, died at 1:15 o'clock Friday morning at his home, 1125 Midland av.

Death was the result of a complete physical collapse nearly a year ago, from which he was unable to recuperate. His condition had been regarded several times as critical, and each rally left him weaker than before. He was resigned, himself, to the knowledge that the time had come for him to lay down the many tasks he carried on so long for the benefit of his fellowmen and he faced the mystery of the hereafter unflinchingly.

His wife, Mrs. Mary Browning Betts, whom he married in 1928, and his only son, C. [Charles] Fred Betts, widely known local newspaperman, were with him when the end came. They are the only surviving close relatives.

Funeral services will be held in the First Universalist Church at 2:30 o'clock Monday afternoon, followed by burial at Oakwood cemetery. The service will be in charge of Dr. John Murray Atwood, president of the St. Lawrence University divinity school, assisted by Rev. Albert C. Fulton, former pastor of the First Presbyterian church, and it will be very brief, in accordance with a formula laid down by Dr. Betts several years ago.

Friends will be received at the Midland av. home from 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Few personalities within the last half century have left so deep an imprint upon the life of Syracuse as that of Dr. Betts.

Vigorous, aggressive, uncompromising as to principles and unrelenting in pursuit of purpose, he was an actual force in the affairs of the community from his arrival in 1889 until his death. Entirely aside from his greatest work—the organization of the moral survey committee and its five-year fight to wipe out the segregated vice district—he figured prominently and helpfully in every community enterprise of importance during the entire 42 years.

He was born in Winnebago [County, at Rockford], Ill., on March 6, 1858, in the time and section remembered now for the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates.

His father was Andrew Jackson Betts, descendant of New Englanders who went west early in the nineteenth century. His mother had been Phoebe Nichols, of another old New England family.

Andrew Jackson Betts was a carpenter, who wanted to preach religion. He had seven children and an income that was pitifully small and uncertain, even for those modest days. When it became too inadequate to keep the

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household going, frugally as it was expended, he decided to move back east. And, when Frederick W., one of the younger sons, was a small boy, the family settled at Onondaga Hill. There the boy who was later to become so influential a factor in the life of Syracuse grew up.

His father taught him carpentry and he learned with it at the work bench the simple, cheerful philosophy and the Universalist theology which guided and shaped his life. At 21 he married Mary R. Browning, youngest daughter of an Onondaga farmer, and for five years they lived with her parents on their lonely, isolated farm. There, one son was born and there he began—on long winter evenings—the reading that nursed and fanned into flame his conviction that his mind was capable of greater things than seemed in store for him.

At the end of five years he decided to change his environment. With his wife and first son, Welcome A. Betts (now dead,) he moved back into the village of Onondaga Hill and set up again as a village carpenter.

But it was no use. The call to bigger things was too strong to be resisted. Before a year ended he had sent his family back to the farm, scraped together \$500, and was entered in the theological seminary at St. Lawrence University in Canton.

Mrs. Betts later joined him there, and they lived in a room in the old university dormitory until he had finished a year of his course. It took every cent he had and all he could earn by working in the hours not given to study. He was at his wit's end when Providence intervened with a "call" for a preacher for a small church in Plymouth, N.H. A fellow student had been engaged to take the pulpit after college closed, but had another offer he desired to accept. and so, at a salary of \$600 a year, the young carpenter-preacher packed up and departed for New England.

He was ordained there to the Universalist ministry, and after a year was called to another pulpit in Palmer, Mass. For more than three years he guided the destiny of that parish, until his health broke down and he was compelled to take leave. He was on this leave when the opportunity for which he hoped and prayed came to him.

Of that he said in his book, "Forty Fruitful Years," these vivid phrases:

"From our playground in the village on the hills we could draw a map of it all (Syracuse) as it stretched itself slowly out between the lake and the hills.

"Those were the days of gas. When summer twilight came and darkness ended our play we boys would lie upon the grass together and watch the city of the night as it was slowly born. We could not see the lamplighters on their way, but we could mark their paths as they lengthened behind them along the city streets.

"While the mellow tints of the yellow light increased until they filled the valley with a soft radiance so dim, so mysterious that it hid yet hinted at all

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the life below us, we boys talked, as boys have always talked since boys were upon the earth, about life, the world and our future. It was boy stuff—most of it. Little of which we dreamed has ever come true in detail, yet out of that dim past of boyhood rises a memory so vivid that now I understand that it has shaped my whole life.

“Between the boyhood conversation in the twilight, under the stars, there stole into my soul the vivid, haunting impression that down where the city grew, my life work awaited me.”

And it did. For in 1889, when the First Universalist Church was oppressed by poverty, torn by dissention, and apparently on the point of giving up the struggle to exist, there came to Dr. Betts the opportunity he wanted. He was called here to take up what seemed an almost hopeless task.

The church, then at the northeast corner of W. Genesee and Franklin sts., had been built in 1869. It was in disrepair. Congregations were small and collections were smaller. But the new pastor acknowledged no discouragement. With joyful enthusiasm, he bent himself to the job, and in 1906, he had progressed to the stage of building and opening the “new church” at Warren and Adams sts.—the building that will always be known as Dr. Betts’ Church and that serves as his monument.

Outside the walls of his church the militant pastor found much work to be done.

His greatest task, of course, and the one for which he is best known, was the cleaning up of the segregated vice district. He, more than any other man, was responsible for the wiping out of the famous “red light district,” filled with houses of prostitution, that stretched for blocks east of S. State st. His instrument, through which he worked, was the moral survey committee. It was organized just before the war, and for many years it was the agency with which the decent elements within the community maintained touch with the underworld it sought to curb and control.

Another work, however, which he regarded as just as important and in which he took greater satisfaction, was his leadership in the Rotary Club’s famous philanthropy—the care of crippled children. He was the originator and sponsor of this work, in which he interested his own Syracuse club and which has now become a recognized part of International Rotary.

To list all of the civic and philanthropic activities in which Dr. Betts engaged during his life in Syracuse would be a hopelessly impossible task.

He served as president of the Associated Charities from 1906 to 1910.

He was president of Syracuse Chapter, American Red Cross, from 1922 to 1931.

He was a member of the board of trustees of the Syracuse public library from 1915 until his death, and since 1925 had been its president.

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He was a Mason, a member of the Rotary and Citizens clubs, a former president of the Co-operative Welfare Association and either a leader or an active worker in virtually every public movement of the last two-score years which aimed at civic betterment.

A prolific writer and a ready, forceful speaker, his efforts were limited only by the amount of time available. He wrote many books and short articles, including his last and best-known work, "Forty Faithful Years," in which he expounded his own philosophy. Some of his other works were "Philosophy and Faith of Universalism," published in 1913, and "Billy Sunday, the Man and His Method," in 1916.

In 1928 he was voted by the congregation of the First Baptist Church what he sometimes declared was the greatest honor that ever came to him—"Syracuse's Most Useful Citizen."

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DR. FREDERICK W. BETTS

Dr. Betts went about doing good and he went to all classes, creeds and colors. To do good was the joy of his life and even in his long period of illness he strove to reach out his helping hand. In his own church he was the indispensable friend and helper of all; in the New York State Convention of Universalists and in the Universalist General Convention he served to the uttermost. His articles in "The Christian Leader" and his books were always masterpieces in hope, faith and love. His sermons were always an inspiration to his congregation, the creation of a scholar, but more than that, the passion of a great lover of mankind.

In September, 1930, the first serious warning of the breaking body came to Dr. Betts. It happened on a Sunday morning and he asked Dr. [Fred] Leining to conduct the church service. Dr. Betts, however, could not remain at home, so with aid he reached the church and sat in the family pew during the service. After the service, he collapsed. Friends literally carried him to his car and from his car to his bed. In a few days, he was able to resume his customary activities but the warning had come.

Fortunately the vacation period had been devoted to the writing of his autobiography and thereby we have a record of his fruitful years before his arrival for the Syracuse pastorate and afterwards.

A year passed and it was noticeable that he was losing his usual vigor. On the first Sunday in October he delivered what was his valedictory sermon and it was a powerful utterance. From this day, a decline followed. It seemed at the Christmas season that he was recovering. He attended the Christmas service in his own church and took part in the Christmas activities of Rotary. But after the holidays, it was evident that actual recovery was impossible. Early in March, he began a sleep that ended in the early hours of Friday, March 5, and Dr. Betts went on to the Immortals, the Comrades who had gone on ahead.

The news appeared in the morning newspaper and the entire city was in sorrow. This minister to all, who had been honored as the most useful citizen of Syracuse, had reached his journey's end. Never has "The Syracuse Herald" carried so many columns of eulogy from its most prominent citizens as were written concerning this minister of the First Universalist Church. On Monday, the day following his birthday, the memorial service was held in his church. It was the day of a blizzard but the church was crowded with friends. The platform was a floral paradise and people of every station were in the congregation as mourners. Mr. Frank J. Tanner of Buffalo, the Rev. C. C. [Charles Clare] Blauvelt of Rochester, the Rev. Stanard D. Butler, D.D., of Utica, Mrs. Bertha F. Hinds of Meadville,

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Penn., Miss Carrie A. Ritter of Utica and the Rev. E. [Emerson] H. Lalone of Canton were the out of town Universalists at the service. About ten of the ministers of the city were present. The honorary bearers were prominent citizens; the bearers were the trustees of the First Universalist Church.

Dean John Murray Atwood of the Theological School and Dr. Albert C. Fulton, executive secretary of the State and City Federation of Churches, two friends of many years, conducted the service. Dr. Fulton for twenty years had been pastor of the First Presbyterian Church and was associated with Dr. Betts in community enterprises. Dr. Atwood knew Dr. Betts when he was a theological student and he delivered a beautiful eulogy. Mrs. Bertha E. Mulford presided at the organ and the church quartet occupied its accustomed seats.

Dr. Betts leaves behind him his wife [Mary Browning Betts]; his son, C. [Charles] Fred Betts; a sister Mrs. Ida B. Thompson, and a brother, Mr. B. F. Betts of Cleveland. He is also survived by a grandson, Mr. Browning Betts of Washington, who is the son of the deceased son [Welcome Andrew] of Mr. and Mrs. Betts. Their marriage was in its fifty-fourth year.

On Friday, March 11, a memorial service was held in the Temple Society of Concord, the synagogue where Dr. Betts was often a guest preacher. This church with the Unitarian and Universalist churches had established a close friendship. The speakers were Rabbi Benjamin Friedman, Dr. Albert C. Fulton, the Rev. W. W. Argow, pastor of the May Memorial Unitarian Church, and Dr. John H. Applebee, the former pastor, and Mr. Hurlbut W. Smith, chairman of the board of trustees of the Universalist church. The rabbi recited the Kaddish which is a Jewish doxology, a prayer of ancient usage in the memorial service of a great and holy man.

On Friday, March 25, the annual Holy Week service was held in the First Universalist Church. It was a memorial service to Dr. Betts with Mr. Albert Everts, Dr. Charles P. Hutchins, Mr. Hurlbut W. Smith and Dr. Fred C. Leining as speakers. Dr. Leining conducted the communion service.

On Easter Sunday, the large congregation realized that it was an Easter that would be different and its message must apply particularly to their beloved pastor. Dr. Leining conducted the service and devoted his prayer, his scriptural selection and his sermon to Dr. Betts' victory over the grave. He announced the action of the church in naming the edifice, "The Betts Memorial Universalist Church." The music by the chorus was beautiful. The floral decorations were simple and affecting. Ten young folk were christened; seven became members of the church.

Dr. Betts was a Mason, a member of the Citizens' Club and a Rotarian. From 1906 to 1910, he was president of the Associated Charities. From 1922 to 1931, he was president of the Syracuse Chapter of the Red Cross. From 1915, he was a trustee of the Syracuse Public Library and during the

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past seven years he was its president. He was chairman of the Moral Survey Committee of eighteen which eliminated the notorious red light district of the city after a five years' fight. He founded the hospital for crippled children which is a movement now associated with International Rotary.

For more than a decade he was a trustee of the Universalist General Convention. For nearly forty years, he was a trustee of the New York State Convention [of Universalists], serving for four years as its president. He was a trustee of St. Lawrence University and when the Theological School became a separate organization, he became one of its trustees. In 1903, his Alma Mater honored him with the degree of doctor of divinity.

If you are seeking his monument, look about you in the above named institutions and in the hearts, minds and lives of thousands of his fellow citizens. To him the climax of his career was in the receipt of a silver cup in the First Baptist Church, Syracuse, in 1928. This cup was always on the piano of the parlor in his home. It was to him the most valuable thing in his house. This church asked for votes on the person who was to be regarded as "The Most Useful Citizen in Syracuse." Dr. Betts received the largest number of votes in this contest and thereby was the first citizen to be accorded this honor. In his "Forty Fruitful Years," he writes, "When I came to Syracuse, Universalism was a discredited religion here. When my name was proposed in the Ministers' Association, it was the pastor of this First Baptist Church who objected to me and prevented my election for a time and who said, when my name was up for consideration, 'Wherever Universalism is there is immorality.'" (This was a predecessor of Dr. Bernard C. Clausen.) Over thirty years later that church voted publicly to invite me to speak on Baptists to them. We had a glorious meeting. Then, in 1928, they elected me above some very useful citizens to get the cup."

This was the climax of his life, for it was his victory as a Universalist minister and as a man. This cup contained the "Well done," the benediction of the city he loved and loved to serve.

Frederick William Betts was born in Rockport, Illinois, March 6, 1858. After the Civil War, his parents located on a farm on Onondaga Hill, a few miles from Syracuse. He learned the carpenter's trade under the father's leadership, worked with him, and with him worked the farm. His interest in religion prompted him to hear and know the prominent ministers in Syracuse fifty years ago. His father was a Universalist who had always dreamed of himself as a Universalist minister. This desire was impossible to fulfill but the son inherited it. Then came the decision to enter the Theological School of St. Lawrence University with the class of 1887 and with him went Mrs. Betts and their small son, Welcome. They had funds to finance only one year and at its ending it was necessary to seek a pastorate for he would not borrow money for his continuance in the course. A few months were spent

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in the Universalist Church of Plymouth, N.H. Then, came a three years' pastorate in Palmer, Mass. Then, in 1889, he accepted the call to a divided and dying church, known as the First Universalist Church of Syracuse. For forty-three years, he was its pastor and under his leadership, a new edifice of his own design was erected, in 1907, with no indebtedness. His church has become one of the most useful churches in Syracuse. For several years, he went to Gloversville for evening services and in that city organized a Universalist church. Dr. Betts was always a student and educated himself to a high scholarship.

Always, he included his church folk in the fame and joy of his community accomplishments. The writer has often heard him pay high tribute to his church which allowed him this large activity in civic affairs and stood with him in his battles. "I have done things," he said, "for which ministers in some churches have been discharged. But you were with me and I am profoundly grateful." He was able to accumulate an independent income so that he needed only \$1,500 per year from his church as salary. In recent years, the salary has been \$2,500 per year. The church thereby has been conducting its affairs on a small budget. The church naturally suffered a severe shock in the death of its minister but it is rallying and recovering. It knows how much it has had in Dr. Betts. Already the men have organized into a Men's Club.

Dr. Betts has written three books that will live. When "Billy" Sunday conducted his revival meetings in Syracuse he found a Universalist minister who would talk back to him. Dr. Betts opposed his visit and this opposition led to the beginning of a deep friendship with Dr. H. [Henry] M. Cary, our missionary to Japan, who was then a Congregational minister in Syracuse, opposing Mr. Sunday's campaign. Dr. Cary became a Universalist minister as a result of this contact with Dr. Betts. He wrote the booklet, "Billy Sunday, the Man and His Methods." There are several ministers who were influenced into the Universalist ministry by Dr. Betts. The list includes the late Rev. L. O. Black and the Rev. C. [Clinton] A. Moulton, from the Cicero church; Rev. G. H. Campbell, pastor of the Cicero church; Rev. J. D. Herrick of Towanda, Penn., and the Rev. C. V. Wilkin of Middleville. In 1926, with Miss Carrie A. Ritter acting as editor, Dr. Betts wrote his first book, "The Abiding Life." In 1929, at the urge of Dr. Harold Marshall and others, Dr. Betts wrote his autobiography, "Forty Fruitful Years," with Miss Ritter acting as editor and compiler.

If you would know what have been the moving beliefs and factors of this busy and masterful life, read his books. The entire picture is in the two books and the story is told in simple language, in a modest tone and with the man confessing that he was far from perfection. Miss Ritter is gathering his notes and manuscripts and it is likely that a book of his sermons will be

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published. Miss Ritter is a very close friend of the Betts family and this magazine is fortunate in having this personal word of appreciation from her which appears on the next page.

A young clerk saw the announcement of his death in the paper with the picture of Dr. Betts. "There's a fellow who could talk," he said to the writer. We must also say "There's a man who could live." He has gone for years with the sight of only one eye. He carried for years a pain at the base of his skull resulting from an accident. He was suffering daily from the hardening of arteries. But these afflictions meant little to this man who was determined to serve and serve he did down to his last conscious moments.

"I have been very busy living," said Dr. Betts, "and thinking and doing. I have had a glorious and interesting time of it. I have tried to show my faith by my works."

Empire State Universalist, Cortland NY, April 1932

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