Taking a Leap of Faith
Deepening our Roots and Reaching for the Sky
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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12 water glasses, 1 wash boiler, 2 dishpans, 67 knives, 70 forks, 11 tablespoons, 58 teaspoons, 33 plates, 70 cups, 2 porcelain pitchers, 3 glass dishes, 2 vegetable dishes, 13 card-table covers, 1 long table cloth, and 24 chairs—this was the inventory taken by the Unitarian Women's Alliance of this church in 1935, as reported by Mrs. Edith Sheffer, the minister's wife, and Thelma Alger, along with the explicit instructions that, “These articles are to remain at the Sheffer home except when in use.” Of course those were the years we didn't have a building of our own to meet in, so it makes sense our common belongings had to be housed in someone's home. “From pillar-to-post,” is how they used to describe this period of “homelessness” when our services were held in places then called the Casino, the Bandbox, the Little Theatre, the Knights of Pythius Hall, and the Sun Life Building.

Today we have a place of our own with much better than a small copper tub for heating and washing our dishes in, and plenty more plates, cups, and dinnerware to wash too. But if it weren’t for the faithfulness of Edith and Thelma and a small number of others who made up the Spokane Unitarian Society back then, it's not likely our church would even be here today. As one of our briefer histories succinctly explains, “It was a period of gradual decline. Along with the rest of the country, the Society suffered from the effects of the Great depression, and by 1935 was almost inactive.”

It would have been especially hard at the time to maintain hope that our church had a future, not only because the church had become all but inactive, but because just a few years earlier we had an average Sunday attendance of 800 to 1000. Compared to that, Unitarianism in Spokane must have seemed all but dead in 1935. But somehow Edith and Thelma, and a few others whose names we don't know anymore, kept our faith alive, enabling us to be here today, a thriving church community continuing to bring a liberal religious presence to our region of the world. That's what I call a leap of faith, forging ahead when all seemed lost.

Just bringing Unitarianism to the wild and rugged Inland Empire took an enormous leap of faith. It was way back in 1877, 137 years ago, that a Unitarian missionary, the Rev. Edward Calvin, attempted to establish a church in Walla Walla. His heretical sermons drew a lot of attention there, but his audience wasn’t interested in creating a lasting church community. After Calvin left, they lost interest in Unitarianism.

Nine years later, Charles William Wendte tried it again, with a six-week missionary trip through the Pacific Northwest. His first stop was also Walla Walla, where he hoped to revive interest in what Calvin had already begun, but, again, he found no
Taking a Leap of Faith

one committed enough to start a Church. The renowned atheist, Robert Ingersoll had also only recently spoken there, raising the fury of a Fundamentalist preacher who got the entire community up in arms. So Wendte decided to move on.

Upon first arriving in Spokane, nobody would have faulted him for simply turning around and calling it quits. Those he’d been in prior contact with, who he hoped to interest in starting a church, immediately joined a posse “dispatched to chase marauding Indians,”1 according to one of Rev. Bill Houff’s sermons. “The place was still Wild West in the best—or worst—sense of the term,” Bill said, “Gunfights erupted regularly in and around saloons on Riverside and Main Avenues, and it was not uncommon for impromptu horse races to occur on downtown streets.”2 In fact, the same year the Unitarian Society was founded, a Chinese man, a member of the tong, was publicly hanged in the County Courthouse yard for having murdered a rival gang member.

Despite these violent and discouraging circumstances, Wendte took a leap of faith, establishing the Spokane Unitarian Society in 1887 with only 20 founding members. While the posse was away chasing Indians, or, as I like to say, Indigenous Americans, Wendte arranged a meeting at the Opera House, designed to seat hundreds. But when less than 50 people showed up, he remained undaunted. “The shabby, feebly lighted auditorium,” he said, “the wailing cabinet organ which sustained the singing, and the tiers of empty benches were not inspiring to the preacher, but they proved a challenge to my faith and enthusiasm.” Still, he wasn’t ready to give up. “I have rarely spoken more effectively,” Wendte recounted, “In that hour our expectations were realized and the Unitarian Church of Spokane was born.”3 Born, that is, amidst cowboy posses, gunfights, stabbings, and hangings at the courthouse. How’d you like to try midwifing a church under those difficult circumstances! Yet, here we are, 127 years later, thanks to Charles Wendte’s leap of faith in a better future.

Our first minister was hired within a year. The Rev. Edwin Wheelock came west after fleeing Virginia, which had placed a $15,000 bounty on his, dead or alive, for preaching favorably of abolitionist John Brown. When Wendte heard about him, he knew Wheelock would make the perfect minister for the fledgling Spokane Unitarians. Back then the church made most its income through the Women’s Alliance, which began at its inception, by serving baked bean lunches to downtown businessmen for 25 cents. Dues were a nickel per meeting, and if our members got behind the treasurer rode around on his bicycle collecting what was owed! An additional money making project was planned each month with the goal of clearing 25 bucks.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
Under Wheelock’s ministry, the church managed to acquire land and construct a 275-seat meetinghouse at Jefferson and Sprague, which served us well until John H. Dietrich became our minister in 1911. He was accepted into the Unitarian ministry after the Dutch Reformed Church convicted him of preaching heresy. Spokane was his first Unitarian church, and the place he became a humanist and a leading founder of Religious Humanism. An average of 800 people came to hear him speak on Sundays, which meant services had to be held at the Clemmer Theater (now the Bing) to accommodate the enormous crowd. His successor, M. M. Mangasarian, was even more popular, and drew an average crowd of 1000. But the problem with these ministers is that they weren’t very good pastors, and the church became more of a lecture platform than a religious community.

After he left, within just a few years and a couple of other short-termed ministers, “the Society,” as one of our histories puts it, “failed to conserve enough strength to guarantee a self-supporting church.” That was 1921 which ushered in the lengthy period of “homelessness” I mentioned earlier. For the next 15 years our church struggled to get by, scraping nickels and meeting from pillar-to-post, keeping their faith even though the outlook for Unitarianism in Spokane was grim.

And when I say they kept their faith, I’m not just talking about believing the church would somehow survive. I mean they acted like Unitarians by doing what they could to make the world a better place, though few in numbers with little means. During the 1920’s, for example, at the request of what was then called the Social Service Bureau, our church agreed to “outfit a promising little deaf girl so she could attend the school for the deaf in Vancouver, Washington.” We provided her with shoes, hats, and the like throughout her education, and the women’s alliance spent much time during the summers sewing new clothes for her. During the Great Depression, after a request for help, we also spent many years collecting and sending used clothes, shoes, bedding, and whatever else we could find, to the residents of Lewiston, Montana. We held benefits to support the Social Service Bureau’s Baby Milk Fund, to purchase books for the public library, and furnishings for the YMCA, “But while we were doing all these things,” Helen Peterson said, during the Women’s Alliance 1959 Autumn Tea, “we had lots of fun and best of all, we made lifelong friendships. Surely, while working for our church, even now one of the important things for all of us, young or old, each in her own way, is furthering the cause of liberal religion in our community.” That’s a leap of faith, believing, even in the leanest of times, that our church could make a difference and would somehow continue on in the years ahead.

In 1937 we began meeting regularly in the Temple Emanu-El, giving us a greater sense of stability and longevity. Six years later we were able to purchase the Patrick Welch house, known today as the Glover Mansion, which was our church home until we outgrew it and built the space we’re in now in 1994. The Welch family was Catholic, and when asked about having sold their home to the Unitarians, Mrs. Welch replied, “Quite something, given all the hell we’ve raised in it!” Throughout all the years since, each generation understood the importance of our presence in this
community, of the need for what our histories repeatedly and unapologetically call, liberal religion. In 1938, for example, a newspaper article highlighting our 50th Anniversary, stated:

Recognizing the right of private judgment, the sacredness of individual convictions, the moral obligation to be faithful to one’s best thoughts, but requiring no assent to any theological creed as a basis of fellowship, the Unitarian society welcomes all who desire to promote the religion of truth, righteousness and freedom. United by such a simple bond of union, members of the First Unitarian society have conducted services regularly during the past 50 years. Conscious that the genius of the Unitarian religion is in expressing the good times past in the brave... spirit of today, the members of the society plan its golden anniversary observances not only to commemorate the past but to project plans for the future.4

And, as projected, here we are, 77 years after this article was written. During the long interim between then and now a lot of amazing things happened, and many good things were accomplished. Individuals as noteworthy as William Howard Taft, Booker T. Washington, and even the founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger visited us. Sanger’s visit, especially, caused quite a stir in the local community. According to Arthur Peterson, one of our church members at the time (recorded around 1945), “Bill Neimeyer, the workhorse of the Unitarian movement in Spokane, until his death, and I were at the door of the church, prepared to sell [Mrs. Sanger’s] booklets [on birth control for 15 cents]. As we opened the door, a cop whom we both knew stepped up and said, ‘If you guys sell any of them books, I’ll have to pinch you.’ Bill and I went into conference. It was an easy matter to evade the law. I stepped to the door and collected a 15-cents admission charge. Bill stood in the back and passed out the booklets.”

We have a rich history that I could say much more about, but the real point is what it says about our church today, about the original indelible character that has remained an essential part of who we are and always have been. Firstly, we know that Unitarianism in Spokane has long been home to colorful and controversial characters who don’t mind defying the status quo. From members like Bill Neimeyer and Arthur Peterson who found a way to circumvent the law, to ministers like the heretic John Dietrich and the fugitive Edwin Wheelock, we remain a community that often swims upstream and goes against the grain. Secondly, we appreciate intelligence and sound reason. It can be no accident that John Dietrich became a humanist while in Spokane, influenced by the bylaws we adopted as early as 1888, stating that, “The authority for its belief is reason; The method of finding its beliefs is scientific; Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion.” But as we soon learned, even with as many as a thousand people coming to hear our ministers speak, humanism and reason wasn’t enough. So thirdly, our church has always needed a true pastoral community in which we minister to and support one another.

4 Nov. 13, 1938.
And fourthly, our church has always maintained a prophetic and activist presence in our community and in the wider world.

This is why the two most successful ministries in our church history were under the leadership of the Rev. Rudy Gilbert, from 1957 to 1972, and Rev. Dr. Bill Houff, from 1973 to 1988, lasting 15 years each. Both of these men were intellectual and humanistic in their thinking, but also personable and pastoral towards people. They were also both prophetic activists in our community. During the tumultuous 1960’s Rev. Gilbert established a Public Affairs Committee that sponsored many public meetings on controversial issues like the nature of communism, admission of China into the United Nations, and Medicare. The committee also started several public service organizations like the Spokane Memorial Association, the Spokane Human Relations Council, a Tutor Aid program for struggling students, the Fair Housing Center, the Spokane chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, Neighborhood centers that provided birth control counseling and information laying the ground work for Planned Parenthood, along with other efforts for abortion reform laws in Washington, black-white dialogues, two regional social action conferences in conjunction with local universities, as well as continuing efforts to improve housing, education, and employment in our community. And, of course, toward the end of his tenor, ending the Vietnam War became Rev. Gilbert’s central concern.

As many of you know, Rev. Dr. Bill Houff, who passed away just a short time ago, was minister here the 15 years following Rev. Gilbert. Bill was likewise an intellectual, scientific humanist, who developed his mystical side while here. He was also extremely pastoral and, in fact, ended his successful career as a scientist to become a minister because he loved people and wanted to around them. And he was a prophetic activist. During Vietnam, at the start of his ministerial career, he helped form the Redwood City Committee Against Napalm, and organized against its manufacturing there. Throughout his career he remained active in organizations like the ACLU, the NAACP, the Sierra Club, the Washington Environmental Council, Planned Parenthood, Zero Population Growth, Amnesty International, the Center for Environmental Understanding, the Riverview Youth Center, and the Peace Justice Action League of Spokane, to name a familiar few. He also gave many prophetic sermons here, including “Silent Holocaust,” which launched a movement that led to decommissioning the radioactive Hanford Nuclear Reactor just three years later.

During his first official sermon in this church, Rev. Houff said, “Tomorrow grows out of yesterday.” This single statement is really what this sermon on “Taking a Leap of Faith” is all about. Faith, to me, isn’t about recklessly jumping into the unknown. That’s where science and reason come in. Though we can’t know anything with absolute certainty, any leap of faith ought to reflect our best educated guess. Faith allows us to move forward with both hope and thoughtfulness. “Taking a leap of faith,” rather, is about passing on our faith, our values, and our legacy, including our organization, our building, our endowment, and all our shared property, including our dinnerware, to new members and on into the next generation. And it’s about
working to create a more just and free world, if not for ourselves, then for those who follow us.

When I think of all we’ve helped accomplish during just the past couple of years—marriage equality in our State and its domino effect around the nation; the statewide decriminalization of marijuana that will help curb our system of mass incarceration; our support of Smart Justice and reforming the criminal justice system in our own community; our resolution to end the Death Penalty just a year ago that is, at least, part of what recently persuaded our Governor to stop executing prisoners; putting our money where our mouth is by installing the largest church solar array in the Pacific Northwest on our roof—I think about the legacy of goodness and justice we are leaving behind for our community and our children just as our Unitarian ancestors did for us.

Just think about the huge difference our church made in passing marriage equality alone! If it weren’t for our presence in Spokane it is unlikely Referendum 74 would have passed. And we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Charles Wendte and our 20 founders back in 1887 who braved gunfights on our bare streets, or those who sold baked bean lunches for 25 cents, or met from pillar-to-post for fifteen years, or risked bringing controversial liberal voices like Edwin Wheelock, John Dietrich, and Margaret Sanger to Spokane. We don’t know what the future holds in store for our church, but we can trust it will be a better future because of the good work we’re doing right now.

In the coming months and years together, we will continue to create community, find meaning, and work for justice in amazing ways. We will continue to support each other in the trials of life, and in our common endeavors to make our world a better place for everyone. We’ll continue to work to make Smart Justice reform a genuine reality in our community; and to further advance equality for all who are marginalized—gays, lesbians, and transgender folk; disenfranchised people of color; immigrants and their families; for those as far away as Israel and Romania, and as near as the Geiger Correctional Center or our downtown streets. We’ll work together to put a permanent end to Capital Punishment in Washington as well as in our entire nation. We’ll continue our efforts create true income equality by overturning Citizens United. We’ll work to spread Unitarianism and its message of freedom and equality throughout our region by reaching out and supporting rural communities, just as Charles Wendte did 127 years ago. And we’ll continue to work for a cleaner environment so that our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren can inherit a healthier planet.

I wanted to say all of this at the launch of our annual Stewardship campaign as a reminder that what we do really does matter, and that our presence in Spokane is part of something huge that transcends just us and our own time and place. Thanks to your continued presence and support now, we can take our next leap of faith into a brighter tomorrow for everyone.