

# REVERE THE PAST

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An "Our Story" sermon presented at the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation,  
by Rev. Kenneth W. Phifer, February 15, 2015



REVERE THE PAST. That phrase that titles these remarks is taken from one of our hymns, As Tranquil Streams (#145), where the third verse begins "A freedom that reveres the past..." As one who believes in the importance of knowing history, I do revere the past.



I revere the challenges met with intelligence and courage by our forebears. I revere the commitment and resilience of men and women who have kept this congregation alive for 150 years by their and your dedication, by their and your hard work, by their and your energy, and by their and your conviction that liberal religion matters, matters deeply.

Over these past 70 years, this congregation has gathered at three different locations, for a year or so after the Second World War at State and Huron, a building erected in 1882, now Hobbs and Black Architectural Firm. That was sold and the congregation moved to Washtenaw for the next 53 years, coming to this site in 1999.



There have been thousands of weddings, hundreds of memorial services, hundreds of baby dedications, thousands of new members welcomed, thousands and thousands of committee meetings, endless church suppers, numerous counseling sessions, dozens of congregational meetings, work parties, lectures, classes, engagements off-site to promote social justice, writings, conferences, and much, much else.

This has always been an active congregation. Our people have always been involved, as is essential in a democratically run congregation, in the work of the church, and likewise involved in the affairs of society. We have always felt that our mission as a congregation is to encourage spiritual growth, however we define that, and we have defined it in many ways, to encourage spiritual growth among our members, and to make the world a better place to live in, just and fair, kind and generous.

To no one's surprise, I have divided my remarks into three sections: Ed Redman's years, Erwin Gaede's years, and my own 25 years. The past decade I leave to Gail in whatever fashion she wishes to address it.



Ed Redman, 1943-1960

Ed Redman became the minister in 1943, at a time when the church barely had 16 families and a budget or less than \$3,000.00. The Depression and then World War II were the primary causes of this depleted state of our membership and our finances. At war's end, the American Unitarian Association, which had floated a loan to construct the building at State and Huron, a loan never fully repaid, and which actually owned the building, decided to sell it rather than try to repair its damaged state. The AUA was paid off and the home of Dr. Dean Myers at 1917 Washtenaw was purchased. A parsonage was added at the rear of the structure several years later. Services were held in what came to be called the Emerson Room, with people spilling out onto the interior steps and onto the porch in nice weather. Ed and Annette Redman greeted each person as they arrived, and served refreshments, sometimes breakfast. First Unitarian in the late 40's and early 50's was a sort of Mom and Pop church, with their five sons adding to the parental image.

As the church grew, though, there was clearly a need for a larger space, and plans were begun to build some sort of sanctuary and social hall. It took several years to accomplish this, as the congregation was not well-to-do. The generous bequest of long-time members George Leroy and Bessie Florence Jackson made possible the completion of the building, as well as the establishment of the Jackson Social Welfare Fund. This is a Fund devoted to First Amendment causes and those individuals and organizations committed to the peaceful resolution of conflict. This Fund has distributed tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars across the years.

The Jacksons valued the Redmans' pastoral attention. They also valued the congregations' opposition to the witch-hunts of the 1950's. There was strong opposition to the loyalty oaths required in the state of California, and equally strong opposition when such tactics made their way to the University of Michigan, costing four professors their jobs. This church supported those professors and made sure that people of any and all opinions, political, economic, religious, and otherwise were welcome here. Such controversial figures as Howard Fast and Helen Gehagen Douglas spoke here.

The congregation became involved with the city's Human Relations Commission in efforts to provide equal opportunities in education, housing and employment. A young African American student associated with the congregation named Eugene Sparrow was inspired to enter Harvard Divinity School, then was ordained by this congregation. He served for a brief time as its minister-at-large.

In the early 1950's, Unitarians and Universalists began talking of a merger. This congregation voted strongly in favor of such a move in 1952. To further this goal, completed continentally in 1961, the church joined the Michigan Area Council of Liberal Churches in 1955. Two years later we hosted the Midwest Unitarian Universalist Ministers Institute. Ed Redman was actively engaged in these efforts towards merger.

Prior to Redman's taking on the ministry here, the great theological issue confronting this congregation was whether humanists and theists could co-exist in a congregation. Theist Jabez Sunderland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century felt they could not and should not, but his generous spirit accepted the fact that there were people of both theological opinions in the church. In the 1930's, the Humanist Manifesto was drafted here, which seemed to many to settle the issue—we were a humanist congregation.

Redman had a larger vision, which emerged out of conversations with a Dr. Bagchi, a member who had been raised in our "sister faith" in India, Brahma Somaj. Redman said he saw a larger vision of what knowledge was, and saw truth in the writings of Indian mystics and saints. With Bagchi's help, he arranged for one of them, Swami Ji, to speak here. Redman wrote of that moment that the Swami, seated cross-legged, greeted his audience with these words, "I greet you gods and goddesses." He won their hearts immediately, and their minds with his presentation, so similar to what Redman and other ministers had been preaching. A not insignificant number of his sermons from then on dealt with insights from the various world religions.

In a way, perhaps unconsciously, he was following the advice of Eliza Sunderland at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, when she spoke on "A Serious Study of All Religions." That enterprise, now widespread in our movement, had one of its beginnings in this congregation.

Towards the close of Redman's ministry, the church had begun to grow in membership. To accommodate the nearly 500 children and 500 adults who were active, two neighboring houses were purchased. Soon the church would be doing two adult services and three religious education programs every Sunday. As Ed Redman's ministry ended, the church was strong in spirit, in numbers, in finances, in commitment to social justice, in education programs. It was fully recovered from the desperate years of the Depression and the War.



Erwin Gaede, 1961-1979

Erwin Gaede wrote of his first years in Ann Arbor as being a time of "optimism". The whole nation had become engaged with civil rights issues. Religious communities of every kind were bursting with people and programs. We had a young president full of vigor who had inspired people to ask what they could do for their country. Sadly, so much of this optimism was soon to be turned into anger and

conflict, even bitterness. Through it all, Erv Gaede tried always to do what was right, what was just, what was kind, what was fair.

Erv marched at Selma and at Montgomery. Erv and strong congregational leaders withstood the rude challenge of Charles Thomas to take over a Sunday service to read the Black Manifesto. Out of this experience came a commitment to work in and with the black community in Ann Arbor. Unlike other religious groups who gave money to the Black Economic Development League only for specific projects which they approved, our congregation gave funds that allowed the League to choose what projects they would use the money for. This congregation was instrumental in helping to elect Ann Arbor's first black mayor, Albert Wheeler, whose rich legacy includes two daughters active in local and state politics.

In keeping with what Redman had taught, that there is beauty and wisdom in all the religions, the congregation in January, 1962, resigned from the Ann Arbor-Washtenaw Council of Churches because of their stated goal of witnessing to the "essential oneness in Jesus Christ as divine Lord and Saviour." The Unitarian Universalist vision is a larger one, one that embraces and learns from every religion and from those who are not connected to any religion.

Erv worked with others to encourage humane treatment of animals involved in medical research. He was part of a core of people whose activism led to tighter ethical rules in the use of animals in research.

In 1968, the congregation under Erv's leadership joined with several others to create the program called Project Transition. Every week members of the congregation would bring a pot-luck lunch to share with residents of Ypsilanti Regional State Psychiatric Hospital who were bussed to the church. It was a chance for them to get away from institutional rules and institutional food. After lunch, there would be various activities. The program ended when the Hospital closed some twenty years later.

Congregants were involved in writing to prisoners, and sometimes visiting them, and when they were released trying to help them make the adjustment to life outside prison.

One of the most courageous things that Erv Gaede did, again not alone, was to engage County Sheriff Harvey, a very nasty, very frightening bully. Erv wrote of this experience: "I discovered what Sheriff Harvey had done to a group of draft resisters in the county jail...we chased that Sheriff back and forth across the county as far as law and order would permit and we finally cornered him—he had broken the law. The State finally moved in and closed the incorrigible cell."

Several members of the congregation joined with Erv and members of other congregations to form what came to be called MAPS, the Memorial Advisory Planning Service. MAPS offered help for people planning ahead for the disposition of their body after death—funeral, memorial service, donation of body parts or whole body, plus information about the many other things required of survivors, sometimes even planning the service itself. This organization lasted until just a few years ago, but was instrumental in helping to get people to think about what none of us wants to think about, our own death, and what we might envision as being of most comfort to those we love whom we leave behind. Not incidentally, MAPS was also concerned to reduce the sometimes outrageous costs of funerals.

The Ann Arbor congregation was for many of the radicals of those years a safe haven. The famous incident of John Sinclair being tricked into selling dope to Federal officers led to his being imprisoned, and to his mother moving here from Flint. Elsie Sinclair said that the one place she did not feel ostracized was this church. After fifty years of absence from religion she joined First Unitarian and became a Super Volunteer, eventually becoming our magnificent newsletter editor, but also filling in wherever needed—cleaning carpets, sewing curtains, fixing food for Project Transition, and advising ministers.

It was during these years that Bill Albright joined the music staff. Pianist, organist, choir leader, and composer, Bill became an inspiration with his brilliant performances, wide ranging selection of music, and impish sense of humor. Bill helped to arrange for the purchase of a new organ—which, I believe, still resides in the Washtenaw building—and helped to finance it by starting the Ragtime Bash, featuring himself and other notable local performers of classic jazz. Bill also brought with him his wife Sarah, who would succeed him as Music Director in 1985 and provide more than 20 years of outstanding choir direction and organ and piano performance. Music, always appreciated, became a major part of the life of this church, which I am delighted to see has continued with Glen Thomas and Alison.

It was during these years that the program of Extended Families was begun, several of them continuing to meet during all my years and perhaps still meeting. Singletarians was started and became an Ann Arbor fixture for single men and women in its weekly programs.

Then there was Vietnam. This long and brutal war cost the lives of more than two million people, 58,000 of them Americans. Our involvement began quietly in the Eisenhower Administration, began to grow during the Kennedy presidency, and then expanded hugely under Lyndon Johnson. It would cost him a second term. It would end the national focus on civil rights. It touched every American, not least those in this church.

As Erv noted in a later talk, the church was divided on the issue. Part of the reason for this was political, as the church had many Democrats and it was a Democratic president who was in charge of the war until 1969. Some felt strongly that the war was immoral, wasteful, and laden with lies and hypocrisy, a charge that the Pentagon Papers made very clear was true. Others felt that in a time of war, a citizen's obligation was to support the Government and the troops. There were no easy ways to deal with the issue. Passions ran high.

Erv spoke his opposition to the war frequently. In time this would prove costly for the church. People did not want to come to church to fight, so many left. The church school attendance dwindled and so did attendance at Sunday services. Some people met during the service time in another place in the building. They eventually formed a UU Fellowship that met elsewhere. The large numbers of members, the strong financial position, and the spirit of optimism all faded. Erv spoke for many when he talked later of the "anguish I experienced during those years."

A vote was taken to dismiss him as the minister, but it failed. One of the results of this was a somewhat divided congregation, those who stood loyally by him, those who chose to ignore him. In the latter group were a number of people who began to do lay services, a strong component of church life when I arrived in 1980.



Kenneth W. Phifer, 1980-2005

In my final report to the congregation as its senior minister, I saw my 25 years here as being divided into three periods: 1980-1985, 1985-1990, and 1990-2005.

In that first period, I understood my responsibility to be to address issues and concerns raised in the packet, in my interviews with the Search Committee, and by congregants during the Candidating Week. First among these was a strong commitment to religious education, a long standing value in this congregation which people wanted to see strengthened and expanded. We started a Coming of Age program for youngsters in their last year before high school in which they would be paired with an adult member for the year, study Unitarian Universalism, and then present their Credo at the end of the year. We started adult religious education classes, in which I participated every year.

It was not long before we realized that a half-time person was not enough, so over the next several years we increased the time for the DRE till we had her full time and then were able to add a half-time assistant. In my 25 years the number of children tripled to close to 300.

A second issue raised in the packet and in my interviews was the lingering distress over Vietnam. Some people were still angry. Some people still felt hurt. I sought to work with the congregation to heal these wounds, with pastoral visits, with sermons directed to healing and forgiving, and wherever I could to bring some humor into our time together. Part of the fallout from the division within the congregation was an absence of congregational social justice involvement. We were able to reconstitute the social justice committee under the leadership of Jane Phifer. Within two years our congregation had become an influential voice advocating for Michigan to become a Nuclear Free Zone.

Not long after the statewide vote on this issue was taken, a number of people became concerned about Central America, specifically wondering if we could become a sanctuary congregation for refugees from the terror in their countries. In 1987, after three years of hard work, we voted overwhelmingly to become a sanctuary congregation. A year later we welcomed the Rodriguez family to safety on our property and in our midst. As you know from last month's presentation, that family has worked hard and taken full advantage of the opportunities given to them.

In later years, this congregation took up the unpopular struggle to gain full civil rights for lesbians, gay males, bisexuals, and transgendered people. We worked to house the homeless through the Interfaith Hospitality Network and through Religious Action for Affordable Housing. We were part of the Hunger Coalition and maintained ties to the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice. We were active participants in the work of the Interfaith Round Table. We were mentors to black youth, and sponsored various programs to enable them to become aware of opportunities for education and employment.

Part of the effort to bring our congregation together as a community was what I called the Celebration of the Living Church, held in May 1982. We invited each of the living former ministers to return and speak—Harold Marley (1929-1942), Ed Redman (1943-1960), and Erv Gaede (1961-1979). Long time members were also honored on that day.



The second period was 1985-1990, a time to celebrate an anniversary just as you are doing this year. We commissioned Bill Albright to compose hymns, and three of them are found in the current UU hymnal--#43, #158, and #310. We commissioned Bill Lewis to do art work of his choice, and he did the fine portraits of Jabez Sunderland, Harold Marley and Ed Redman that hang on the church walls. Steve Schewe prepared a magnificent photographic display of our 125 years and Marjorie Reade wrote a history of our first 100 years. The UUA president, Bill Schulz, was the main speaker that weekend.

While this anniversary celebration was being planned and carried out, I called together a long range planning committee to think about our future. They had one unanimous recommendation: buy land. The congregation had considered doing this in the mid-1960's, but the furious debate over the Vietnam War ended those discussions. Now we were faced with the pressures of many new people coming to the church and our growing awareness of the inadequacy of our building. It was unsafe for children from a fire safety standpoint. It had no on-site parking, and we could not do the remodeling we needed unless we could add such parking and that was not feasible. The heating system was outmoded if not dangerous. After lengthy discussions, many investigations, and much consideration, the congregation voted by 83% on January 26, 1992 to relocate.

Much of the remainder of my years was devoted to that project, completed in the fall of 2004, enabling me to retire. I had promised the congregation that the relocation and the capital campaign as well as the actual building of our new church home would not diminish my attention to pastoral matters, to sermons and teaching, and to involvement in social justice. I believe that I lived up to that commitment, and certainly the congregation did. We increased in numbers, in finances, in work in the community, and in developing new programs for children and adults. Two examples of this expanded involvement were the Parish Nursing Program and the completion of a Memorial Garden.

In my first sermon in this building, I spoke of stewardship—stewardship of the UU tradition, stewardship of the congregation's heritage, and stewardship of the land, some 45.9 acres of land. As I

have looked now for more than nine years from the outside rather than the inside of the church's working, I believe your stewardship of all these three elements has been superb, for which I salute you.

The hymn from which I took my title has further words with which I would leave you because they point you towards tomorrow:

"A freedom that reveres the past, but trusts the dawning future more;

and bids the soul, in search of truth, adventure boldly and explore.

Prophetic church, the future waits your liberating ministry;

go forward in the power of love, proclaim the truth that makes us free.