

First Unitarian Church

July 29, 2018

**[SLIDE 1 - Blank]**

Today, I want to tell you a little about our church's origin story. Not the whole Unitarian Universalist church—not the denomination. But the story of this particular congregation. A story that you are now part of, whether you are a long time member, or even if this is your first visit today.

Origin stories are important parts of who we are. They help us understand where we are in the story ourselves, and how what we are doing fits in, moves the plot along, connects or doesn't with what happened before.

First Unitarian's story begins in 1949 with a man named Felix Arnold. A person who, to the best of my knowledge, no one here now remembers knowing in person. We invoke his name fairly often—whenever we mention the Arnold Room here on the church campus. That's one of our meeting rooms. And if you've looked around in the Arnold room, you might have noticed a little plaque, a sign really, that tells us he was the founder of First Unitarian.

Felix Arnold was a high school principal in Grants, just down the road. He was also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School. Harvard has a long history of training progressive ministers. The university got its start for that purpose back in 1636- it was originally a school just for training ministers. For developing a "learned clergy" in the New England colonies. As controversy over Unitarianism happened in the early 1800's Harvard took a defacto (and controversial stand) by hiring Henry Ware as the Hollis Professor of Divinity. Ware's predecessor had been a Trinitarian. Ware was a Unitarian. Harvard has been training Unitarian and other progressive ministers ever since.

Felix Arnold was not a clergyperson, but that's where he had studied.

And he lived in Grants, New Mexico: carrot capital of the United States. This was the year *before* Paddy Martinez discovered uranium there.

I know, right? Carrots in Grants?? Yep. All that volcanic soil was perfect for them.

Grants was awfully different from Boston. Not as metropolitan, for sure. I wonder if our liberal minded principal was feeling a little isolated there in the nation's carrot capital. He did have at least one ally though: Louise Pembroke was a teacher in Grants, and she also had liberal religious ideas. But Grants had a population of about two thousand. Awfully small.

So when Felix and Louise got it in their minds that people in this area should have a liberal religious option, they decided to focus their efforts eighty miles up the road, in the city of Albuquerque. There had to be at least a few religious liberals there among the population of ninety-thousand.

In May 1949, Felix Arnold and Louise Pembroke put an ad in an Albuquerque newspaper inviting anyone who was interested to meet with them at the YWCA. Our records indicate that Felix contacted “the Boston office,” which probably means the American Unitarian Association at 25 Beacon Street on the Boston Common, and he found someone who could come and speak with the group, the Rev. Francis Ricker.

That’s kind of amazing if you think about it. Two people in Grants had the idea that there should be a liberal religious group in Albuquerque. They placed an ad in the paper. And with nothing more than that—nothing more than an idea and an ad that they cast out into the community to see who might “bite”—they got the Boston office to arrange for a minister to come and talk to them. Who the *them* was, Felix and Louise did not know. They hoped someone would show up at that meeting.

It turns out, their efforts to form a new congregation came right at the beginning of the American Unitarian Association’s Fellowship Movement—a time when the AUA was actively trying to plant and support small groups of Unitarians all around the country, and especially in the western half. And they had field staff dedicated to just that. A fellowship was defined as a group of ten or more people affiliated with Unitarianism, who wished to meet regularly for lay led services. No ministers. The groups were too small.

The night came to meet at the YWCA. **[SLIDE 2- YWCA]** Felix, Louise, and Francis Ricker waited to see who, if anyone, would turn up besides whatever small group of friends they might have recruited. I imagine Felix and Louise must have been a little anxious. Had they gotten ahead of themselves by inviting a special speaker? It didn’t matter. When it was time to begin, thirty people had arrived. Thirty! They were off to a great start.

**[SLIDE 3- Blank]**

Felix Arnold’s story has always reminded me of the Gospel of Matthew in the Christian Bible; the story about how Jesus recruited his first disciples. Passing by two fishermen casting a net into the sea, Jesus calls out to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” They drop their nets and follow.

Like those fishermen in the Jesus story, Arnold gave up his livelihood to take this path. When the school officials in Grants heard what Arnold was up to, they deemed him a *heretic* unfit to lead a school, and fired him. He had to go to work selling encyclopedias to get by while getting our church off the ground. I’ve always liked to imagine him pitching his heretical theology along with the books, as he went door to door in 1950’s Albuquerque.

Before too long, Felix Arnold moved away, probably for work. As far as I can tell, we do not have any photographs of him, and even the research librarian at Harvard Divinity was unable to find much information about him. **[SLIDE 4- Louise]** We do have a photo of Louise Pembroke though. Here’s one of her in the late 60’s or early 70’s with her husband Ollie.

**[SLIDE 5- BLANK]**

After the YWCA meeting, a group formed that began to meet regularly at a member's home. A newspaper article from 1949 says they met at 123 South Walter, which appears to be this house. **[SLIDE 6- HOUSE]** Built in 1901. It's between Presbyterian Hospital and downtown, just off of Central.

The group didn't only invite Francis Ricker to speak. They also had representatives from other religious organizations.

**[SLIDE 7- Blank]**

It was only later that year, according to a 1949 Albuquerque Journal article, **[SLIDE 8- newspaper]** that the group decided that they would be Unitarians. There was no Unitarian Universalism back then—the Unitarians and the Universalists had not yet merged. They were still two different denominations.

The article says, “The Liberal Religious Fellowship—“ (apparently that's what we went by back then)—“the Liberal Religious Fellowship will affiliate with the American Unitarian Association, members announced after a Sunday meeting of the organization.”

I'm fascinated to imagine what else they might have decided on. That was an important fork in the road. But we have no record of the other speakers.

The article continues: “The group will be known as the Unitarian Fellowship of Albuquerque.”

**[SLIDE 9 —blank]**

The group met in that home for a while. But later, perhaps as they outgrew a parlor space, Temple Albert **[SLIDE 10 —Temple]** hosted them. Our congregation still partners with Congregation Albert today, including on the annual interfaith thanksgiving service, which we are hosting this year.

**[SLIDE 11- Blank]**

**[SLIDE 12—AUA yearbook]**

In its 1950-51 “yearbook,” the American Unitarian Association lists our congregation for the first time, under the category of “fellowship.” **[SLIDE 13—fellowship units]<sup>i</sup>**

**[SLIDE 14—Albuquerque Fellowship listing]**

**[SLIDE 15- statistics page]**

The yearbook lists some statistics for us, too.

**[SLIDE 16 - circled statistic]**

That year the congregation had thirty members, and its operating expenses were \$398.<sup>ii</sup>

**[SLIDE 17 - Blank]**

Things were moving along nicely... even as the congregation literally had to keep moving. When Temple Albert was sold, the Unitarians moved to another space, the USO building. Their meeting space was right above a bowling alley, right next door to a jukebox, and right in front of railroad tracks.

They learned their lesson.

Next they bought a small lot on San Mateo and Central for \$1600. Prices sure were lower back then. The lot was also very small: 100 x 100 feet.

In 1952, with help from a grant from the AUA, the group called their first minister, the Rev. Franklin Smith. **[SLIDE 18—newspaper clip Smith]**.

And now that they had a minister on board, they decided to officially incorporate as a church.

**[SLIDE 19 - Blank]**

A few years later, an unexpected opportunity came their way. It was the summer of 1955, and many members were away on vacation, when 4 ½ acres on the corner of Carlisle and Comanche became available. The cost was \$15,000. And they had to act fast.

The few members who were present saw the potential and decided to go for it. One member, taking the risk upon his or herself, put up the cash and took out a mortgage the church could pay back later.

The decision to buy this land that we sit on now was a controversial one. Some members were afraid it was too far out in the middle of nowhere for anyone to come. A few people even left the congregation over it. That's hard to imagine now, but looking at a picture of the land *after* they had built on it, you can see why they were worried. **[SLIDE 20—early campus]**.

The space they built included the Arnold Room and the Wesson Room. This is what Wesson looked like in its early years.

**[SLIDE 21—Wesson Room]**. Stylish. Dignified. Look at that fireplace in the corner.

Here's what the parking lot looked like **[SLIDE 22- parking lot]**. It's in the middle of *nowhere*.

**[SLIDE 23 - Blank]**

In 1958, the average income was \$4,500 per year. Minimum wage was \$1 per hour. And this small group of people found the resources and the courage to buy this land and build this campus.

The AUA's Yearbook from 1959-60 lists First Unitarian again, this time with a membership of 255 people.<sup>iii</sup> Expenses: just under \$15k. They were growing.

The Rev. James Wilkes arrived in 1962. **[SLIDE 24- Wilkes in Newspaper]**. His first sermon was called "A Right to Heresy." His installation sermon, delivered by another minister from Boston, was entitled "A Ministry of Disturbance."

They were our people, alright.

**[Slide 25- Blank]**

At first the congregation met in what is now Memorial Hall. That was the original sanctuary. But Wilkes was an activist and a fiery preacher. He attracted crowds way too big for that hall.

So... they decided to build a new sanctuary to accommodate their growth, and create the space they needed to continue with their mission as a spiritual home for religious liberals and as a force for good beyond the church doors.

**[SLIDE 26- "church plans new addition"]** It was covered in the news. An article reports the church membership at 525 adults and 400 kids. The church had doubled in size in two and a half years.

**[SLIDE 27- men with building model]** Here is the architectural model, with the architect, Harvey Hoshour; the minister, James Wilkes; and William Parish, the chair of the building committee at that time.

Our library room is called the Parish Library. Now you know why. It isn't a synonym for church library. It's named after a person.

**[SLIDE 28- Hoshour Kimo]**

Hoshour was a busy architect in Albuquerque. He also renovated the Kimo Theater downtown.

**[SLIDE 29- Blank]**

For the Unitarian sanctuary, he set out to design something that would "encourage religious thought beyond the limits of the building itself."

**[Slide 30- under construction]** A building with big windows, lots of light, and beams wrapping around creating connections from one side to the other.

**[SLIDE 31- completed building]** This is when it was newly finished.

**[SLIDE 32- campus]** Such a desolate campus.

**[Slide 33- “City Unitarians to Use New Spacious Church”]**

Back in the news again: “City Unitarians to Use New Spacious Church.” The building was an architectural landmark. Groups of architects still visit it from time to time today.

**[SLIDE 34-- blank]**

We have Louise Pembroke to thank for much of this historical information. Although her co-dreamer and co-conspirator Felix Arnold moved away, Louise remained part of this congregation for 54 years, until 2003. Her typed history of the church is part of our archives.

I found some other cool tidbits from the past. Harvard Divinity maintains the an extensive archive of Unitarian and Universalist history. And they used to be on our newsletter mailing list. The head research librarian, a UU, sent me some images of the our church newsletter from the 1970’s and 80’s. Check out this March 17<sup>th</sup> 1970 edition of The Messenger.

**[SLIDE 35- Messenger Newsletter]**

Some things never change. For example:

**[SLIDE 36- Folk Dancers]**

The folk dancers were meeting, with Charlene Baker as their contact person. Charlene is still the contact person for the folk dancers today.

There were lots of singles groups back then, too.

**[SLIDE 37- Singletarians]**

Like this one called the Singletarians.

Other groups are harder to understand through the veil of the past.

**[SLIDE 38- Miercoles group]** Here’s news that a group called El Miercoles will be held on the first Tuesday of every month. Miercoles is Spanish for Wednesday. Huh.

**[SLIDE 39- Blank]**

This week I put Harvard Divinity back on our mailing list, for future historians. And in August the Arts and Aesthetics Team will hang a new show in the Social Hall- this one is a show of First Unitarian history, so you can take a closer look and see other images from the church archives.

Now if you’re thinking that new sanctuary you saw a few minutes ago looked a lot like our current social hall, **[SLIDE 40- Old Sanctuary]**

then you must have joined the church just within the last several years, and you are right.

**[SLIDE 41- Blank]**

In the early 2000's, First Unitarian began a new phase of innovation and growth. Attendance increased after 9/11, but unlike other congregations, which experienced a bump and then a return to normal (or close to it), First Unitarian's membership grew.... and then grew more and more.

Soon our 1960's sanctuary was too small.

In 2009, we worked with Mullen Heller Architecture to develop a master plan for the church campus, which would include building a new sanctuary and turning the old one into a social hall. In 2011 we held a capital campaign. Together we raised more money than had ever been raised by this congregation before: over two million dollars. We built this beautiful sanctuary.

**[SLIDE 42- Christine and Angela]**

Here I am standing in the same spot I am now, with Christine.

**[SLIDE 43- Beam]**

And it's hard to see in this picture, but one day everyone was invited to sign this beam that is now over our heads.

When you're a part of this place, you're *really* a part of this place.

**[SLIDE 44- Blank]**

This one was designed to reflect and honor the values of the last one: light, openness, an echo of those big beams, but this time they crisscross in a symbol of interdependence and connection.

Right around the time we completed it, same sex marriage became recognized by the state of New Mexico. People came from neighboring states to make their unions official. The first wedding that took place in here was the marriage of two adorable men from Texas, complete with boots, jeans, and cowboy hats.

When I asked them where on campus they wanted to do their ceremony, at first they said, "Well, we were thinking maybe in the courtyard because we'd like to keep our hats on." I told them, "Oh, you can wear those hats anywhere you like!" And dragged them right here to consecrate this place.

**[SLIDE 45- sanctuary at night]**

It really is a sacred place. This whole campus is. Not just because of ceremonies or services. But because it is something precious we've inherited from those who came before. We are the temporary custodians of this place and of the mission of love,

community, and justice. This space is made sacred whenever people, from any walk of life, are gathered here for the many expressions of that mission.

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When we moved into this sanctuary we started using the old one as a social hall, but... we never actually turned it into one. The acoustics in there, which were fine for preaching or music, are terrible for coffee hour. The old mural wall takes up 30% of the space. And the once-stunning building has become dated and worn out. The windows are not energy efficient. You can barely see through some of them. The swamp coolers are unreliable. The roof leaks. The kitchen has a special smell that you can't get out and I can't forget. It has appliances that have been described as "intimidating."

Recently, we've started looking around and noticing that many spaces on this wonderful old campus had begun to look shabby. In the last year, we've improved the Wesson Arnold wing. Volunteers Melissa Nicoud and Martha Ketelle have brought the memorial garden back to life. (You should visit it sometime, it's teeming with flowers). Memorial Hall has gotten a makeover thanks to the vision and work of Board Member Donna Collins, and small donations from about twenty members. The staff offices were remodeled to provide workspace for every staff member.

But the Social Hall is a large-scale project, and it's going to take all of us to remodel and restore it. That's why at the annual meeting we voted to conduct a capital campaign this fall. It's time to put some love back into what we have received from those who came before. This precious church. And it's not just ours. We share it as often as we can. On Friday, the Roots Summer Leadership Academy kids gave their big performance in this room. Mayor Tim Keller was here. When he stood up to say a few words, the first ones he said were words of gratitude to First Unitarian. He said he is here "all the time" for community events, that he has observed how First Unitarian welcomes everyone, and that our campus functions is almost like a community center.

And then the kids filled this space with creativity, feistiness, beauty, and hope.

This congregation has now been continuously gathered for sixty-nine years. When our founders convened the very first meeting, we were just a few years past World War II. The scale of evil and destruction unleashed on the world in that war had shaken the very foundations of religion.

This church was gathered for those who wanted to worship—*worth-ship*, to honor to that which is worthy—with courage. With eyes open, minds engaged, hands and hearts ready to serve. With vision and radical generosity toward future generations.

We honor and give thanks for those who came before and prepared the way for us. We recognize that there is no crisp division between past and present. It is continuously unfolding. We are part of it. Let us dedicate ourselves to the mission

and care of this church, investing in its care, growing in our understanding of love and service, practicing a faith that moves beyond limits.

May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> P 97. You can access AUA yearbooks through Andover Harvard Theological Library:  
<https://listview.lib.harvard.edu/lists/drs-431987221>.

<sup>ii</sup> P 172

<sup>iii</sup> p 218