

In 1998 a young congregation on Madison's East Side celebrated a major passage. It completed its five-year startup as an "extension congregation" and installed its former extension minister, the Reverend Jonalu Johnstone, as its ongoing minister. Members looked to the future with vision and hope. They looked to the past with amazement at how far they had come. Here's how it all began . . .

East Side Story

The Beginnings of the James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

The slender isthmus between two lakes divides Madison, Wisconsin, into distinct East and West sides. A landmark on the near West Side is the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed building of First Unitarian Society, whose sanctuary window rises from the grass like the prow of a ship. By the early 1990s it had more members than it could easily hold. The lay-led Prairie Unitarian Universalist (UU) Society to the south was thriving too. A few Madison UUs began to dream of a third place to worship and grow.

At First Unitarian Society's parish meeting in November 1991, the congregation appointed an Ad Hoc Committee on a Third Society to research the potential for a new church and report back in a year. The committee chair was Art Hackett. He and his wife, Sharon Bogert, had been tempted by the idea of a new church since the 1980s, partly because they had once been among the few couples at First Unitarian with small children. The committee also included Arthur Thexton, three other members of First, and a representative from Prairie.

Thus began what some called "the Art and Arthur show." Committee members mapped the current church membership, queried other UU churches that had sponsored new congregations, analyzed data from the Dane County Regional Planning Commission, and surveyed church members to see if any wanted to start a third church. Responses showed equal interest in East Side and far West Side locations.

Facing east

Should UUs expand eastward or westward? The committee examined two hypothetical locations: the corner of Century Drive and the Beltline in Middleton to the west, and the corner of Cottage Grove and Stoughton Road to the east. The West Side offered a fast-growing, high-income population that matched traditional UU demographics. The East Side offered greater economic and ethnic diversity, an advantage in the eyes of Hackett and Thexton (who both lived on the East Side). By the time the two returned from a UUA training weekend in Boston in May 1992, they were ready to recommend an East Side focus.

Thexton reported to First Unitarian Society leaders as soon as he got home. As Hackett wryly told the committee, "He gave them both barrels, and as a result of his enthusiasm and his lack of time to prepare a more thoughtful and tactfully worded report, gave the mistaken impression that we are already on the road to starting the new church."

Feathers unruffled over the summer as the committee met with separate focus groups of West and East sides. Carol Ferguson, Margaret Iles, and four others attended the East Side focus group. That East Side group expressed hope for a religious alternative closer to their homes, with more economic diversity and more spirituality in its services. “God is hardly mentioned [at First],” one said.

That fall First Unitarian and Prairie approved the creation of a New Congregation Planning Committee to establish an extension congregation on Madison’s East Side. The new committee was a step toward independence. Unlike the previous year’s committee, the group met on the East Side and was open to participants who had no connection to First. A well-publicized organizational meeting packed the conference room of Jim Jaeger’s law office at Atwood Avenue.

Through the winter of 1992-93 interested participants met several times a month at the Atwood Community Center, with Thexton as interim leader. Little Amelia Lardy came with her parents, Jeff Lardy and Penny Andrews, as a visible testimony that children were welcome.

The group established clear priorities: spirituality, social action, and the inclusion of children. They created a mailing list, started a newsletter, and adopted a mission statement. In addition, they agreed to ask the UUA and First Unitarian Society for a subsidy, phased out over five years, to help pay the salary of an extension minister to be appointed by the UUA.

Choosing a name was harder. Suggestions included *Eastside*, *Eastview*, *Third Society*, *Aldo Leopold*, and *Yahara Community Church*. The suggestion that finally won the day came from Thexton: to name the church for James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister killed in the civil rights ferment of the 1960s.

First minister, first service

Jonalu Johnstone liked beginnings. As a student at Harvard Divinity School she was attracted to extension ministry, helping a brand new congregation create its traditions and grow strong enough to stand on its own.

Johnstone had grown up a Southern Baptist in Virginia, graduated in Special Education in 1977, and taught in Virginia schools until 1982, when she returned to graduate school. She later worked for several agencies in Virginia and West Virginia. Then, during her experience as an active lay leader in the UU Fellowship of Greater Cumberland, Maryland, she recognized her call to ministry. She entered divinity school in 1990 and was in her last semester when the new Madison congregation applied for an extension minister.

UUA officials showed her packets from three prospective churches. One had sent a notebook bursting with pictures and descriptions of what they wanted in an extension minister. An even slicker group sent a videotape and a four-year budget projection. The packet from James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Church, by contrast, was laughably concise: a slim folder containing just four sheets of paper. But what came across from those scant sheets was enough for Johnstone: a strong commitment to spirituality, social action, children, and diversity. “This is the place for me,” she thought.

The church was informed of Johnstone's appointment the week before its grand opening service, set for June 6, 1993. That was the bright spot in a week of frustration. The Moravian pastor who had volunteered the use of his church was overruled by his church at the last minute. Volunteers stood outside the Moravian church to re-direct traffic to the Schenck Middle School gym.

The service, however, offered inspiration and hope. The morning dawned clear and sunny. Seventy to 100 people attended, including some new and unfamiliar faces. The guest minister was David McPherson of Brookfield, a friend of the late James Reeb. The district president, who had forgotten to pack her shoes, conveyed denominational greetings in an elegant white suit and Reeboks. "Sometimes you have to make do," she said. At the end of the service the children presented a flaming chalice banner they had just made in Sunday school. Later the banner would hang in the James Reeb sanctuary.

By afternoon the founders were in high spirits. They unwound at a committee member's apartment while they took turns looking through Jonalu Johnstone's ministerial packet. "It was one of the best days," Thexton recalls.

That summer the church met in a park shelter at Lake Edge Park near Cottage Grove Road. Over the weekend of July 9-11 the Reverend Johnstone and her partner, Jane Powell, came for a formal interview with the congregation. Johnstone laughs as she recalls exchanges from that first meeting. "What kind of music are you envisioning?" she asked the group. After a long silence, someone finally spoke up: "Nothing in German." After a culminating service in the Andrews-Lardy barn, Johnstone and Powell withdrew to the farmhouse while the worshipers voted to commit themselves to five years with Johnstone as extension minister.

Johnstone moved to Madison in August and led services in the park. Those were challenging, nomadic times. There was no meeting space, no office. A rumored briefcase of office supplies had been assembled and misplaced, not to resurface until four years later. After two or three days of near-panic she relaxed: "We're just going to make this happen." By fall the church had a minister's office at the Atwood Community Center and an indoor Sunday meeting place.

Tenney Nursery & Parent Center

In September 1993 the Tenney Nursery & Parent Center was renovating an old cab company building on Mifflin Street to convert it into a daycare center. Tenney needed rental income; the church needed space for Sunday worship and religious education.

It was not a perfect match. The day before the first service, a thick layer of construction dust covered every surface. The meeting room was not yet wired for electricity. Johnstone and volunteers swept, scrubbed, and hung construction lights to make the room habitable for the Sunday 11:00 a.m. service. Fresh construction dust greeted worshipers each week until the daycare renovation was done.

Some problems proved intractable. The meeting room was too small, by some estimates seating 40 to 65 people comfortably. Sunday services opened with about 50 adults and

sometimes approached 80, with an average of 63 over the year. And since Tenney Nursery & Parent Center was not designed for worship services, each service began and closed with a workout—hauling the folding chairs up and down two flights of stairs between the meeting room and a storage pallet in the basement.

Religious education classes met in classrooms full of daycare toys the church children were not allowed to touch. Middle school, grade school, and preschool classes met with founding teachers Becky Burns, Nancie Cotter, Ann Fleming, Larry Iles, Joanne Riese, and Mary Wagner. When the preschool curriculum called for a tour of the church building, Cotter took the children to the only spot the church could call its own: the basement pallet loaded with chairs. It may have been the briefest church tour in history.

Many things went right, however. Music took hold with adult and children's choirs, a recorder consort, and 50 new hymnals donated by First Unitarian Society. A social action committee was formed with a focus on the welfare of local children. Johnstone taught adult religious education classes. A women's group built a communal chalice and celebrate the Pagan holiday Impolc with home-baked bread in the shape of a Venus of Willendorf. Spring saw the emergence of a lay ministry group.

The highlight of the year was Charter Sunday on December 5, 1993. UUA district administrator Helen Bishop visited from Illinois. Fifty-six adults lined up during the service to sign the membership book. One former Catholic was reminded of lining up for communion. Arthur Thexton and Art Hackett signed first in recognition of their founding role.

More than 70 people signed over four Sundays as charter members. (The children signed a book of their own.) The UUA welcomed the new congregation into the denomination. James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Church was finally official.

A home of their own

One spring day in 1994 Art Hackett and Sharon Bogert were enjoying a walk when they noticed a "for sale or rent" sign on the Johnson Street building behind East High School. The former T-shirt screen printing Madison Top Company edifice was a mess. Inside it was a dark, depressing maze. Beside it the end of Fourth Street, which served as a parking lot, was strewn with condoms and broken glass. The smaller lot in back had only six parking spaces.

For all its flaws, the place might meet a need. The church had outgrown its space at Tenney and its patience for toting chairs or trying to keep children's hands off the toys. The minister needed an office nearer to services than Atwood Community Center or her more recent office beside a podiatrist at the corner of Washington and First Street.

What should the congregation do? Should it try to make its home in the Johnson Street building, and if so should it buy or rent? The UUA strongly discouraged purchasing the building. The congregation was too new, too financially marginal for such a commitment; it could not even afford a down payment. Yet financial projections convinced the facilities committee that buying was cheaper than rent.

The conflict was resolved in an impassioned congregational meeting in May 1994. Johnstone paced the back of the room unsure whether to hope practicality or idealism would win the day. Then Ingrid Stark stood up. “What are we about?” she asked rhetorically. “This is a church. This is about faith!” The vote to buy was unanimous.

And so another year started in the midst of construction dust. Volunteers demolished walls and built new ones, ripped up carpet, and renovated the bathrooms. Nothing that August was more important than getting the building in shape for services—or so it seemed until charter member Howard Jilbert died unexpectedly. Work shut down, and church members traveled to Janesville to be with the Jilberts at the memorial service. The event marked a profound passage, Johnstone recalls. “A community existed that hadn’t been there before,” she says. “It was very poignant to me to see that support rally around the Jilbert family.”

The first service at the new building was held in the small back parking lot, since the church did not yet have an occupancy permit. Refreshment tables were set up outside. As part of the worship service everyone went indoors to the sanctuary, where Johnstone led a brief ritual to dedicate the space. Mary Wagner, who had hated the building at first sight, says it felt like home.

Religious community

The church welcomed 35 new members during 1994-95. Johnstone wrote, “We became recognized in the community as an affirming church for people who have not found easy acceptance in other places: especially for lesbians, lesbian families, people with mental illness, and biracial families.” By May adult membership topped 100 and again pushed the limits of the worship space. In the fall of 1995, the third year of services and the first year to open relatively free of construction dust, the church began offering two different Sunday services to make enough room for everyone.

Construction never stopped. Nail by nail, door hinge by door hinge, volunteers turned the industrial structure into a church house for children and adults. They attacked the interior with drywall and paintbrushes on Saturday mornings week after week. The many construction heroes of 1993-94 included Ed Kuharski, Ed Jilbert, Jeff Lardy, Randy Coloni, Randy Hill, and Elsbeth Knott, “the Queen of Grout.”

With more than 40 children registered for religious education in 1993-94, the Sunday school split into preschool, kindergarten-through-2nd, and 3rd-through-5th grade classes. Construction went on to give the children walls, doors, and light switches for their classrooms. By 1997-98 Dan Richardson was the new construction hero and there was no sign the building would ever be done.

Yet more important than walls or numbers was the continuing growth of religious community. Sunday services drew people together, especially the sharing of joys and concerns. Music expanded with unconventional performers like Roy Kornburger on the accordion and Janelle Prine on the saw. Various musicians played their own instruments or the borrowed piano, and a trio sang *a cappella* under the name Senseless Acts of Harmony.

Particular services became annual traditions: an All Souls' Day service to mourn the dead, and Martin Luther King and James Reeb commemoration services to reaffirm social values.

The religious character of the church was complex. "I heard that James Reeb is the most Christian of the three Madison UU congregations," one person said in an adult religious education class. "That's funny, I heard that it was the most Pagan of the three," another responded. Not all members shared the same spiritual path, but services made frequent reference to God, Goddess, and spirit.

Community grew through common endeavors like involvement in the Emerson School program for homeless children and the racial justice group's sponsorship of the film *The Color of Fear*. It grew through fun times like potlucks, folk dances, and the annual "Reeb Rave" auction.

It grew through hard times as well. Soon after moving into the Johnson Street building the church held its first memorial service there, for charter member Glenn Iles. The resignation of board president Margaret Iles in 1996 challenged the church to examine the ways it offered its leaders personal support. An emotional debate about changing the organization's name from "church" to "congregation" challenged members to listen to one another with patience and love.

But there was one question that aroused no controversy whatever: should the congregation ask Jonalu Johnstone to stay as its regular settled minister when the five-year extension ministry ended in 1998? The answer was a resounding "Yes!" With Johnstone's installation on April 26, 1998, she and the James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation started a new phase of their life together. Ahead lay new challenges, new causes for celebration, and new opportunities for spiritual growth.

Sarah Gibbard Cook, March 1998

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