

USH Member Phyllis Hall Remembers

Lunch Bunch December 14, 2021.

Phyllis Hall, one of the few members who was active before our Meeting House was constructed, recently offered to address the Lunch Bunch. This gave the group a rare opportunity to learn from one of our members who was present during events surrounding construction of the Meeting House. Her remarks were recorded, and later machine converted to text, with the usual number of errors of one kind and another. What follows is a somewhat edited transcription with a few words added, or removed, of her remarkable talk. The parenthetical (xxxx) marks indicate clarifications of confusing parts of the transcription. Any errors thereby introduced are not those of the speaker. - Janice & David Newton

OK, well this is, I think, supposed to be a speech or talk about the history of our building (Meeting House). This is strictly from my memory and memory isn't all that perfect so please correct me if I'm wrong or add anything that you think would be applicable. We can talk about it later.

I came to Hartford in 1960 from Illinois. We had belonged to the Geneva church there. I'd been a Unitarian for 10 years before that. The church in Geneva was called the Church of The Pioneers. The building was built in 1844. We came to CT in 1960 and moved to Bloomfield. I was looking around for a Unitarian church and whereas the nearest one was down in Hartford on Pearl Street (former location of USH). I went down to Pearl Street and found a very neat small church. It was very efficient. It had two floors. The main floor was the sanctuary and a couple of offices, and down in the basement we had the kids and the social room. I thought that was a very efficient church especially after we came to build the one we built here.

I met Payson Miller. The first time I met him he said to me, "I want you to be on the social problems committee." I said, "OK, I'm on the social problems committee." So, I was then on the committee.

He was a very take-care-of-things person. (He was a take charge type of person) He wrote letters every week to the editor so everybody in Hartford knew he was a very famous person. I really think the reason he wanted us to build the church (current Meeting House) was so that we would be famous around Hartford, too. He was really pushing when he found out what we might build. He really wanted to have it built.

The next thing I want to tell you is about the Endowment Fund. [At that time, we owned \\$1,000,000](#) in Endowment which would probably be, I guess, four or five million now. Maybe even six, but it was used to pay all the expenses of the church, so nobody asked us for (stewardship) money! Money coming from the Endowment paid for the upkeep of the church. I also heard rumors that if they ran out in some years, somebody on [the](#) Council, which was like the Board, would come up with some money and pay the difference. We never heard anything about it. The money theoretically came from when in 1880 the church had \$20,000 and took the \$20,000 and put that money into Hartford Insurance Companies so there was \$1,000,000. In 1960 that's where the money came from. It was very obvious from the beginning that they had already decided to expand and

build a new church when I came in 1960. They already owned the land they had bought from Watkinson School.

I don't know how Victor Lundy was chosen. I wasn't party to that, but I know that he was chosen to be our architect. We would have meetings and we discussed what we wanted in the building. Remember, there were only, at the most, one hundred of us. We were a small group of people and we knew we had a big decision to make about what we were going to do for the future of the church.

We had meetings and we discussed what kind of church we wanted. We knew it would be modern. We knew we wanted to have the kids around us (Around the Ambulatory). That was during those years of togetherness. I don't know if you remember everybody had to be together. OK, so the kids were going to be together around us, instead of (in) the basement which they had been in the old church that was very efficient.

At least we put the little kids down in the lower (Fellowship Hall) level so they could cry down there so we didn't have them upstairs, but we were going to have all older kids upstairs and we're going have a Chapel so the kids could go to the Chapel (off the Ambulatory). That meant walking around the Ambulatory and back and forth. We knew there might be some noise walking to their classes. We didn't realize how much noise that would make if they would go from the Sunday School into the Chapel and back and forth. We knew there might be some noise.

We had some idea that the roof might not do very well. (but not as badly as it turned out) We did know that it was a very inefficient building, and we knew that from the beginning.

Then in came the bids for the building. We had been told that it would take about a third of the Endowment. Then the lowest bid came in. It would take 2/3 of the Endowment and (expenses) went up to take basically all of it. That would be all of our (supporting) income. So what were we going to do? So anyway, with those two worries about it, the inefficiency of the building and the fact that it was way too expensive, on a Friday night we had a vote and the plan was voted **down**, and I remember seeing Payson Miller over in the corner in the room looking very dejected. I looked over he didn't even look at us. Two days later he had a heart attack and he died.

They said that he died of a broken heart and of course people started feeling terrible and very guilty. So how do you live with this? And we still had this problem of what are we going to do.

We had no minister. We had no church and maybe we're going spend all the Endowment, and we were feeling guilty. I think some of us really felt like we couldn't really go through this whole process again. We didn't want to have to get a new architect and go through all the process, the bids and all that, or maybe build an old-fashioned church with a spire which nobody really wanted to build.

So, they took another vote. This time it was 66 to 33 (to build the Meeting House) I still felt that this was a mistake so I'm leaving it to you decide for yourself. Do you think this was a mistake? That's up to you, but after that morning I voted for it. I was one of the 66 and my late husband and I thought we are last persons alive who did vote for it.

We don't know anybody else who is still alive who voted for the church or the wisdom of the vote. But, once it was decided, OK that's it. We were going spend all the money.

I should tell you that the Endowment was controlled by trustees and they had been friends since 1880. They were in charge of our Endowment and it was separate from the church. They doled out the money to us. They gave us permission to sell the Endowment in the first place for the church so they said OK you could spend almost all of it. So, we did spend most of our Endowment. There was very little left.

However, they left the trustees taking care of the money. They doled out money to us and they decided where we could spend it. But they did a very good job of saving money so that I remember one time (subsequently) they got the Endowment back up to 2,000,000 bucks. It's not there anymore, but they did a very good job and I was kind of sorry when we ended the Endowment being controlled by the Trustees.

Anyway, we're building the church and I don't remember, I think it took six months to a year. All that concrete. Everybody in the church who was an engineer type, would come down every night and look at it, so we'll be sure that nothing went wrong. Believe me they watched everything. They never got bored and every pipe that went in and every electrical blueprint was carefully followed so that it was well done. And when the building was built, some things that were in original architect's plans were eliminated to save some money.

\$10,000 was saved and we didn't get a kitchen, so we started a church with no kitchen. Well, that saved us \$10,000. After a couple of years of sales we earned the money to buy the kitchen that we needed. We earned a lot of money by having sales all the time and \$10,000 was saved when Plexiglas was not put above the church ambulatory. Now the church (has places where) Plexiglas was supposed to go up to the ceiling. It still isn't there, but it would have saved a lot of sound from going around. I'm sorry they saved that \$10,000 because the sound is so awful even now somebody walks around the ambulatory, or somebody turns on the water fountain you can hear it.

Oh, and one other thing, I think we didn't get the marble on the walls in the entrance that would be beautiful, but we did save the one thing that we knew we wanted for \$25,000. It was the organ and thank God we didn't eliminate that because it had to be built-in otherwise we wouldn't have it today. I should say that the organ that's in the Chapel I don't know about. It wasn't there at the beginning and I don't know how it got there. Somewhere along the way we acquired that organ as well. It's in the Chapel but I don't know who, but somebody gave it to the church. (The Chapel organ was donated by Karl Peter's wife. It belonged to one of her relatives).

The building got built and went according to plans, but what we acquired was a bare bones building. Shall I say a bare concrete building with nothing in it basically, so we had to earn a lot of money. A lot of things were given to us or things came out of storage. The first two things that I remember seeing in the building was that huge clock, that's down on the wall leading into Fellowship Hall. It still doesn't run. I hope somebody will make it run, but for the whole time, it was there from the very first day. Also, the big, beautiful punch bowl that we drag out for special occasions. We had chairs and heavy wooden tables for eating downstairs which we got out of storage somewhere.

People gave us furniture. We had sales. We earned the \$10,000 to in two years to put in the commercial kitchen and I should say that the church was run from the beginning basically by volunteers. We didn't have money to pay for office staff and the to take care of the yard and all that sort of thing. Building and Grounds from the very beginning worked really hard every single year. I give them a lot of credit for the work they have done over the years to keep that building going, to

keep it clean, to plant trees and put in bushes, fix things, and be sure the boiler works on Sunday mornings.

So we came just about the time when Meeting House was built so we had nothing to do with deciding about the building or what should be in it , but Nat Lauriat came right about that time to be our minister. So when the building was opened, he became, by default the building manager, because sometimes he was the only person in the building. He would shut the building, he would answer the phone, he would lock it up, and he did a lot of secretarial work, even though he was very intellectual.

We had volunteers in the office, and we had volunteers to clean, sometimes once a week. I think we actually paid for a cleaner to come and see that the toilets looked OK. I do remember somewhere along the way, of having the ladies' toilet downstairs become disgusting. Nobody wanted to use it so we started having a real campaign going. "Please do something about the ladies' toilet." One week we came back and we had a beautiful toilet now and finally after two years they've got it fixed. I assume the same thing happened in the Men's room because I was never over there.

Anyway, at the very beginning ,of course, we've spent all of our Endowment so what were we going to do for money? We immediately had a capital fund drive and started the first canvas of course. That was a shock to a lot of people who had never given a dime (and were asked to pay). I think maybe we lost some people because of it.

I don't know, but that's when all the pledging started. To this day, you're giving every year.

(Returning to use of the building, and noise around the ambulatory during services)

Yes, but it was so noisy that it really detracted from the organ itself. I want to tell you wasn't all horror and worry, and we had a great time in our building when it was first used. Remember, it was the time of togetherness and nobody had any money in churches, so in our social life we were there 2 to 3 times a month, as well as Sunday.

We had excuses for every party you could think of. Every fourth Friday was sacred for potluck suppers and lots of people would show up and bring all the food. And, it always balanced and always seems to come out even so that we had the right amount of food. And I remember going to quite a few snowballs and camping trips with extended family .

That's when the Christmas party event started, which went all the way through the June picnic . These events were brought over from the other building we used to have at Pearl Street in the park, So some of the traditions you have today started way, way, way, back. Then I remember one party, oh I was going to tell you about it. Kit Northrop for about 30 years gave a potluck corned beef and cabbage dinner. Well, at one of the parties I have to tell you Jane Lauriat was just the opposite of her husband Nat. She came with a gorgeous gown on and she sang a song that she wrote called Ministers Wife Spoons. Minister's wife is like a doctor's wife, he's never there! She was wonderful anyway. We had wonderful times. This was happening mainly because we didn't have TV, we didn't have Internet and we didn't have computers and we didn't have Netflix, so church was our fun.

We were all raising lots of kids. We had lots of kids because that was the baby boomers generation. When the teenage youth group (LRY) met there were like 200 kids in that group. Everyone sent their teenagers to our program. They didn't come to church, but they sent their kids and the kids wanted to be with their friends so literally there were 200 kids in that group. maybe in 1970 or somewhere around there.

You can imagine the noise running around the ambulatory and sometimes the noise was so much you couldn't actually hear the service because of the kids in the back rooms and they would go to the Chapel just walking through the hall and the doors would slam. So, for a few years we had a lot of problems with too many kids. However, the parties went on and we had fun and I'm not sorry about all the great times and the things we did together.

Well, I want to tell you the price of the organ was \$25,000. We knew we wanted an organ. At the time, my house, my brand-new house with five bedrooms and two baths cost \$25,000. And, you know, the price gasoline costs \$0.15 a gallon and we didn't worry about it. We would now, but then it was no problem. So, an organ was the price of a new house, but we did not take it out thank goodness, otherwise you wouldn't have an organ today.

So, all the things we still had at that time. When, there was a Singles Group with hundreds of people in it. I think they were there in great numbers. They were not part of our church, but they used our facilities. I told you about the LRY, I should tell you about extended families. Do you know anybody missing them now age 70 or 80? We realized that everybody in the church came from somewhere else and nobody had local families, so anybody who was interested in being an extended family just signed up. We had like 100 people signed up and they were arbitrarily assigned to four or five families from babies to grandparents. During maybe 10 years, we had dinners in our home, we went camping, we made trips, we went on picnics, a couple of nights we slept in the basement of the church in Saturday night "pajama parties" making breakfast next morning for everybody who showed up, so that went on about 10 years, and I hope that someday they will do it again. It really was for people who come with nobody and no connections similar to a family, so you put everybody from babies to grandparents together and arbitrarily signed them into groups, and it worked very well. Anyway, we did that.

So, I thought I would tell you about some of the things that have been added to the building that I could think of and I'm sure you'll think of more. All the trees and bushes with nothing around us before. And, every two or three years, things would show up just magically appearing. All the furniture, rugs, tables, and chairs. Everything in the building. Nursery furnishings and Sunday school equipment, kitchen dishes. After we got a kitchen, we had to have all the equipment and dishes to serve 200 people. Now we have playground, elevator, and air conditioning. When the air conditioning came, we could have services during the summer. Before that, church used to end at the picnic and not start again until the day after Labor Day.

Some of you remember the addition of the chancel lift that's in front of the church. A lift for wheelchairs. OK, then solar panels and security system and all the office equipment, and finally pew cushions. I was so happy to see the cushions when they showed up one day. My daughter who's now retired herself, remembers growing up in the church. She said "Mom I remember coming down on Saturday morning with my dad to mow the lawn, and I remember kids running around and making so much noise you couldn't hear anything going on in the service and she said I remember being married there. Her older sister was also very clear we had a reception in basement. At that

time there was no alcohol in our church. We wanted to have wine with our reception, so my husband and I went to the Council which is now the equivalent of the Board, and said could we please have wine? Long discussion. OK, finally they decided we could. Remember at the church you could now have wine for your wedding. From then on, everybody had wine so that was that.

I just want to make one comment about what happens with congregations. Congregations all go up and down over the years. Ours is no different.

We've had our ups and downs where things have been good and bad. It seems like recently during the Viet Nam War we almost split up, but we didn't, and we've had minister problems, and now COVID.

But, no matter what, we're going to be around here we'll come back and if anybody has questions or comments 50 years from now, we will be around, so don't worry.

Those seeking further information on the history of the Unitarian Society of Hartford may wish to read the book, Hartford Unitarianism 1844-1994 by Freeman Meyer

There is also a Trinity College Publication, Victor Lundy's Unitarian Meeting House, Hartford, Connecticut by W. Robert Chapman AMST 811-01 August 1995
