

AN OVERVIEW HISTORY OF THE FIRST PARISH CHURCH IN WESTON (1698 – PRESENT)

The Founding (1698)

To understand the First Parish Church in Weston, it helps to first understand the town of Watertown in the seventeenth century. Five miles to the east of Weston, Watertown was the most tolerant of the Bay Colony towns and the third to establish a church. For over sixty years, the farmers who settled Weston traveled to the Old Meeting House at Watertown's far eastern edge. The journey took an hour or more. At the church on Watertown Common, they would remain for both the morning and afternoon services, each lasting two to three hours, before returning home, often after dark. In 1698, however, the farmers of Weston possessed the numbers, the funds, and the singleness of will to obtain permission from the colonial legislature to separate and form their own parish. The law passed at the farmers' request set the boundaries of the new precinct and provided for the election of two or more assessors, since the new church in Weston would be supported, as the official church for the precinct, by taxes on its inhabitants.

The growth and development of the First Parish Church in Weston is reflected in the stories of the fourteen ministers who have served and led the parish. Though each left an individual mark, as any new minister will, to date the First Parish ministers have all contributed in their own way to the tradition of tolerance inherited from the Watertown church.

The First Century

The infancy of The First Parish was anything but comfortable. The farmers were poor and had a difficult time meeting their assessments. The first man the parish sought for its minister declined the call. Minister-less, the farmers turned to a recently settled teacher in their midst and asked him to preach. From 1701 until 1702, Joseph Mors preached in the Farmer's Meeting House. Then by a thirty to twelve votes, he was called to be the first minister of the parish. A whole year went by before the parish and Mr. Mors could agree on the financial and property terms of his employment. In June, 1703 – two years after he began preaching – Joseph Mors became the parish's first settled minister.

That settlement, however, was a shaky one. The next year, difficulties arose between minister and parish. Apparently, some parishioners were disturbed because their minister remained unordained. Others accused him of stretching the truth a bit, while still others leveled the specific charge that he "gave the dimensions of his sleigh to a neighbor on the Sabbath." Whatever the reasons, Mr. Mors' foes grew in number. Finally, in 1706, on the advice of a council of churches, the parish voted

to buy up Mr. Mors' house and land, indemnify him for his loss, and dismiss him.

The parish's second minister was The Reverend William Williams. A son of a well-known clergyman, a brother to the Rector of Yale College, a first cousin to both Jonathan Edwards, New England's greatest theologian, and to Israel Williams, the founder of Williams College, he was, as the Reverend Charles Russell noted in his brief biography, related to "the most learned and influential men of his day. "Not only did he have the reputation of being a good scholar, versed both in the classics and the Bible, he was a superb preacher, a spellbinder who was in constant demand throughout the colony.

During William Williams's forty-one years, the parish experienced dramatic growth. Q thousand baptisms were performed and four hindered adult names were added to the church rolls. But most of all, Mr. Williams, despite his orthodox Calvinism, stood squarely within the Watertown tradition. No longer was it necessary for people to give detailed accounts of their religious experience in front of an ecclesiastical tribunal before being accepted into church membership. What was demanded was living an orderly and good life, showing a satisfactory knowledge of the Christian religion and agreeing to assent to an already modified and shortened profession of faith. Like his spiritual ancestors in the Watertown church, this deeply spiritual man was a Puritan in his religious convictions. But, unlike them, the whole thrust of his ministry was toward greater openness as the proper soil for genuine religious growth.

This same commitment to enlarging the range of religious toleration was carried forward by his two immediate successors. The Reverend Samuel Woodward, who was minister of First Parish for thirty years, held his pastorate during the days of the American Revolution. Unlike Mr. Williams, he was not particularly eloquent. Nor was he especially well-read. "He was," as his successor, Dr. Kendal, described him, "a serious, sensible, practical preacher, ... always striving to mend the heart and life." He avoided theological controversy and continued Mr. Williams' policy of tolerating an ever-widening range of theological opinion.

Mr. Woodward was followed in the pulpit by Dr. Samuel Kendal. Like Mr. Woodward, Dr. Kendal's service to the parish was long – thirty-one years. Unlike him, however, Dr. Kendal was a powerful preacher, a commanding figure among the Greater Boston clergy. Theologically, he refused to permit himself to be categorized. He shared aspects of both Unitarian and Calvinist thinking but declined to sign up with either. In his Century Sermon, delivered at The First Parish's hundredth anniversary, he condemned the ecclesiastical tribunals which some of his colleagues were clamoring for so that heretics might be weeded out of local churches. "Let me entreat you, my brethren" he said to the citizens of Weston, "guard your Christian liberty. . . Exercise and defend your rights as a church of

Christ. . . Never suffer [the ecclesiastical tribunal] within the walls of this church.”

Until his untimely death in 1814, Dr. Kendal maintained this open stance, and the bitter religious battle that gripped so many New England parishes never took place in Weston. The intense acrimony of the liberal-orthodox controversy within Congregationalism was never a part of the life of this small community. When Samuel Kendal died, First Parish was still a Congregational church. It was also the established church of the town. All that, however, changed in the next few years, during which the town discontinued its financial support of the parish and the parish moved solidly into the Unitarian fold. The success of this latter venture can be attributed to the leadership of two deeply religious men – one whose personality made the shifts as painless as possible, the other who gave the change its theological and intellectual underpinnings.

The Second Century

With the selection of Dr. Joseph Field to be Dr. Kendal’s successor, the parish took its first overt step toward Unitarianism. Dr. Field was avowedly Unitarian in his theology, his Harvard tutor having been William Ellery Channing; and the parish was well aware of his beliefs when it hired him. The parish now considered itself to be part of Congregationalism’s liberal wing; it wanted a minister who reflected its views. Only three votes were cast against calling Dr. Field.

The strength of Dr. Field’s fifty-year ministry here is seen in how he helped the parish face the religious struggles of the day. According to one biographer, he avoided controversy by shying away from unnecessary polemics. Instead, he dealt plainly and simply with his parishioners, always practicing the art of quiet persuasion. The consequence was that this parish was one among fifteen in the state – fifteen out of one hundred twenty-five – that experienced no division at the time of the Congregational-Unitarian separation. In fact, so gradual and uneventful was the parish’s drift toward Unitarianism that its logs have no record of the date it ceased belonging to the Congregational Association.

Another major event that occurred during Joseph Field’s ministry was the financial separation of the town from the church. When he arrived in Weston, all church expenses were paid out of the town’s treasury. The parish elected assessors and appointed a collector to see to its financial support. Emma Ripley in her *Parish History* informs us that the new “machinery did not work [as] well as it had under compulsory taxation.” It took five years before the parish came up with an adequate plan of voluntary subscriptions.

Dr. Field’s successor was Edmund Hamilton Sears. Unlike Dr. Field, who devoted great portion of his time to outside groups (he was chairman of the town’s school committee, an overseer of Harvard

College, chaplain of the state militia, a member of several missionary societies), Dr. Sears, a poet, theologian, essayist and classical scholar, shunned most out-of-town organizations. In the quiet of his study, he authored six books, numerous essays and poems, and edited a widely read religious journal. More importantly, it was there, he believed, in what he called the “ministries of solitude and silence,” that he touched the depths of the holy, the near side of God. Time and again in his sermons he warned against going “to and fro” on the world’ business while ignoring the cultivation of the inner life.

Edmund Hamilton Sears’ pastorate was relatively brief – a little less than ten years. He died in January 1876, after suffering a fall. But like Dr. Field, he had an enormous influence on the spiritual life of this parish. No momentous happenings occurred during his ten years. There were no weighty theological controversies. Yet his writings and preaching set the theological milieu for his successors. The next five ministers, though rejecting some of his beliefs, especially his “spiritualist” tendencies, didn’t stray far from his basic outlook. They, like him saw the characters, the story, the beliefs, the promise, and the rituals of faith as revelations of the God-human encounter. They, like him, saw the cultivation of the inner life as religion’s first and most important step.

Two more clergymen, The Rev. Francis Hornbrooke and The Rev. Hobart Clark, served the parish briefly after Dr. Sears. Together both men ministered here for only five years. Mr. Hornbrooke, a popular preacher, left Weston for the larger and more influential Channing Church in Newton. Mr. Clarke returned to his native Britain to become pastor in Cardiff Wales.

The Third Century

Charles Frank Russell was ordained at First Paris in 1882 and remained the parish’s settled minister for thirty-three years. A major involvement of the parish in town matters began during Mr. Russell’s pastorate. In 1895 the parish sponsored the Village Improvement Society, an effort to beautify the town. Any community resident could belong. During this same period, Mr. Russell himself became personally involved in town affairs. From 1891-1898, he was a member of the school committee and the prime mover behind the centralization of Weston’s schools. He advocated a transportation system for students unable, because of distance, to walk to school on time. The town voted to adopt the system, making it the first such in the Commonwealth.

Succeeding Mr. Russell was the Rev. Palfrey Perkins. An excellent preacher with a profound knowledge of English and American literature, Mr. Perkins preached from The First Parrish pulpit for ten years. Although his stay, by First Parish standards, was brief, his decade here was productive. During Mr. Perkins’ ministry, several adult study groups were formed within the life of the parish. In 1923, Mr.

Perkins was selected to represent the denomination on a special mission to Transylvania. It was largely through his efforts that the Unitarian Association was able to re-establish its ties with the older Unitarian churches of Eastern Europe – a connection revived through the relationship between First Parish and our sister parish in Torda. Mr. Perkins was also a gifted preacher. However, others heard of his reputation and, in the spring of 1926, he accepted the call to the First Unitarian Congregational Society of Buffalo.

In January 1927, the parish extended a unanimous call to The Rev. Miles Hanson, Jr. Born in Yorkshire, the son of a minister, Mr. Hanson attended Harvard College and the Harvard Divinity School. When Mr. Hanson came to Weston, the town had a population of twenty-seven hundred inhabitants. When he retired in 1963, it had expanded to nearly ten thousand people – virtually the same as today. In that time, the parish grew steadily in members, activities, and budget; the church school became one of the largest Unitarian Sunday schools in the state; the Benevolent Alliance developed into an active women's group with one of the highest enrollments in the denomination. In short, Miles maintained, nourished, and cultivated the tradition he inherited from his predecessors: that of a vital parish active in the town of Weston. His strengths, however, were best exhibited in his role as a caring pastor. It was not unusual for Mr. Hanson to make 1,200 pastoral calls a year, a phenomenal number by anyone's standards. In a very real way, he was the town vicar, calling on all who needed him, parishioners or not.

Miles Hanson was succeeded by Harry H. Hoehler, from 1964 until 1975, and by Harry and Judith Hoehler as co-ministers, from 1975 until 1994. Harry Hoehler will be remembered best by the First Parish congregation for the quality of his preaching, his personal leadership and his persuasive ability on issues of social justice and ecumenical understanding. He also maintained a vital link between First Parish and denominational, interfaith, social service and educational organizations. Outside Weston, Mr. Hoehler has been recognized for his involvement in organizations such as the Massachusetts Bible Society, the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, the U.S. Inter-Religious Committee or Peace in the Middle East, the Church Leaders Covenant for Urban Justice and the Harvard Divinity School.

As a member of the first class at Harvard Divinity School to admit women, Judith Hoehler has made distinctive contributions to a number of social, educational and denominational organizations. Although she has been credited with numerous achievements beyond Weston, the First Parish congregation will remember best the humor that seasoned many of her sermons, the enthusiasm with which she engaged parishioners and the pastoral care provided by Judith and Harry Hoehler, individually and as co-ministers. At Harvard, she served a denominational counselor to students, as an instructor in homiletics and (with Harry Hoehler) as a supervisor of interns for nearly twenty years.

Beyond Harvard, she served as a trustee of Meadville/Lombard Theological School and Bowdoin College, as a resident scholar at the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research at Tantur, Jerusalem, and as President of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. In Weston she served as Chair of the Weston METCO Committee, providing access to suburban schools for inner city children, and was instrumental in founding the Roxbury-Weston programs including the integrated Roxbury Weston Preschool, which has operated since 1968 in the First Parish Church School wing.

The Hoehlers were followed by a one-year ministry by Michael Boardman in 1994-95. It was a year of adjustment and evaluation, and a time when the congregation took responsibility for many activities previously led by the minister.

In June 1995, the congregation called The Reverend Dr. Thomas Dale Wintle to be the fourteenth minister. Tom came to the church at the conclusion of an extensive process of self-study by the church's congregation that had been commended prior to the Hoehlers' retirement. In 1993, the Standing Committee commissioned an all-member survey to provide a base for long range planning. The results of this survey were updated and expanded by a supplemental survey that the congregation completed in 1994, following the Hoehlers' time of the ministerial transition. Parishioners were pleased with the direction of the church. The Christian emphasis in the church's worship and educational life was strongly affirmed, and it was also clear that the church served a congregation with a broad range of religious views, and this breadth of belief was highly valued. Recognizing that many families were attracted to the church because of the quality of children's education, the importance of a vital, effective church school program was also affirmed. Many other valued aspects of the church were cited including the music ministry, social outreach programs and adult education.

Nevertheless, the church, because of its growth, was moving beyond the "pastoral" model of ministry in which both ministers were intimately involved with every aspect of church life and was consequently moving toward a "programmatic" model in which a larger staff would attend a congregation with increasingly diverse needs. The search committee, appointed by the congregation to recommend a new minister, understood that the size of the church created the need to think in terms of a ministerial team.

The search for a new minister was a nationwide effort, and so it was with some surprise that the search committee found it recommending a minister from a neighboring parish. Thomas Wintle was not originally from New England. He was born in Baltimore, graduated from the University of Nebraska (B.A.), and from the Chicago Theological School (D.Min.). He was serving the First Church of Christ (Unitarian) in Lancaster, Massachusetts. During his 20 years at the Lancaster church, he was also president and then executive director of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. He was both author and editor of a number of publications arising from his work during these years. He said of himself (1988):

“Theologically, I am a Liberal Christian. To me that provides a faith that is rooted in a great tradition, and yet is free in regard to that tradition’s interpretation under the guidance of the Spirit. Ecclesiologically, I am a Congregationalist. That means at least two things. First, that the local congregation is a true church; it is more important than the national association, which exists solely to serve the needs of the local churches and provide vehicles for larger witness. Secondly, it means that the congregation rules itself; the minister ought to believe in congregational authority, rather than his own, and thus be prepared to encourage, stimulate, facilitate and support lay leadership.”

The position within the denomination that the church was taking in its selection of Tom Wintle was to affirm its Christian stance within the wide range of religious beliefs that characterize Unitarian Universalist congregations. The church’s position was not new. It had already incorporated the Ames covenant into its bylaws. Thus, the search committee was very conscious of the need to attract clergy who would fit the theological outlook of the church yet effectively minister to all parishioners. In this regard it is useful to read what Tom Wintle had written about the task of the liberal church in contemporary society (1988);

“The liberal Christian church sets for itself an almost impossible task. We would speak of God and human responsibility in an age when those topics are often ignored or uttered with dogmatic intolerance. Yet there is, for the faithful Christian, a sense of empowering grace that makes the task an imperative. We believe and act, love and struggle, fall down and get up again, because we have heard the voice of God in the man from Nazareth.”

Today – The Fourth Century

In 2018, Rev. Jeff Barz-Snell replaced the retiring Rev. Wintle and the current era at First Parish has begun. Jeff was the Minister of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts serving in this position since 1998. He is returning to Weston where he completed his ministerial internship at First Parish Church in Weston from 1995-1997, working with Tom Wintle, as well as Judy and Harry Hoehler.

Jeff is a graduate of Bates College with a BS in Psychology and Religion. After college, he moved to New York City and studied performing arts for a year at The Neighborhood Playhouse, training that has served him well. In addition, he holds a Master’s in Divinity, cum laude, from Boston University School of Theology, completing coursework at Harvard Divinity School and Harvard Law School. He also holds a Master’s in Public Policy from Tufts University, with a concentration in sustainability and renewable energy policy. At Tufts, he completed course work at the Fletcher School for International Diplomacy