

[Syracuse, Onondaga Co.]

Betts Memorial Universalist Church Recognized As
One of Most Active Groups in All Syracuse
Will Play Host to State Convention First Week in October

This is the twenty-fifth in a series of feature articles on churches and religious activities in Syracuse, past and present. Another will appear on this page next Saturday.

Central in location, united in organization, Betts Memorial Universalist Church, situated on the corner of S. Warren and E. Adams sts., is one of the most active of the downtown churches.

Continuing its lead in affairs outside, as well as inside the city, the church will play host to the New York State Convention of Universalists during the first week of October.

There is some dispute as to the early history of the church. Mrs. Hetty Underhill is authority for the statement that on June 20, 1817, 21 persons who described themselves as the "First Universalist Society of Onondaga" arranged for "Elder Root of Marcellus to preach in the school-house near Azariah's hall, one-fourth of the Sabbaths in the year ensuing."

Society Formed

In the year 1822, Stephen R. Smith held Universalist meetings at Salt Point, now the First ward of the city of Syracuse. A Universalist society was organized soon after these services began. After a number of years the congregations moved to a hall in the Granger block.

When the Unitarian Society was formed in 1838, many of the Universalists joined the movement. There followed a period during which the Universalist Society languished. It never quite died out at Salt Point, where Avery, Clark, Wood, Beers, Gifford, Devoe and other Universalist families lived.

Many of these families took part in the reorganization of a Universalist Society and in the building of a Universalist Church under Rev. Aaron A. Thayer. Services were held in the Wieting hall until a church was built, this church gathering Universalists from Syracuse, Jamesville, Liverpool, Solvay and Howlett Hill.

On March 12, 1860, Rev. Mr. Thayer preached a funeral sermon on the tragic death of Peter Tinker, who poisoned himself and his two children because of his wife's conduct. The sermon received wide publicity and made the preacher quite famous.

The new church and parsonage were erected at W. Genesee and Wallace sts., the cornerstone being laid in August of 1862, and dedication services taking place a year later.

Organize Women

A Sunday School was organized while meetings were being held in Wieting hall, each child being given a little "New Testament" and being taught to commit verses to memory. A women's society was organized in 1859 under the name of "The First Ward Universalist Circle." After a time this women's society became a sewing circle, making

[Syracuse, Onondaga Co.]

the usual aprons and quilts. Just then came the Civil War and the society was busy for a long time making soldiers' stocking and other equipment.

After seven years in Syracuse, Rev. Mr. Thayer resigned from the parish in 1866, being succeeded by Rev. Charles Tomlinson. This was a year of anxiety. The city wanted the church property on which to erect a high school. There was some division among the people, but the property was finally sold to the city in 1867 and Rev. Mr. Tomlinson resigned.

For two years following his resignation the society depended upon supplies for its pulpit. In October, 1869, Rev. Edwin C. Sweetser became the minister, and a lot was purchased at the corner of W. Genesee and Franklin sts., on which a brick church was constructed.

The church was dedicated in 1870 and in August of that year Rev. Mr. Sweetser resigned to be replaced by Rev. George P. Hibbard. The congregation increased and all went well until, without an understanding with the members of the society, he changed his pulpit and his services after the Episcopal tradition.

Asked to Resign

He was asked to resign, the request immediately causing division in the church. A number of the society broke away and organized themselves into a "Second Universalist Church." This second society, however, soon went out of existence.

Then came Rev. George B. Stocking, and after him Rev. Dr. Richmond Fisk. Dr. Fisk was an able man and grew rapidly into the life and activities of the city. He originated and established a labor bureau in connection with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and was the first Universalist minister asked to join the Ministers' Association.

Rev. Dr. Fisk was followed by Rev. Costello Weston, Rev. Jesse C. F. Grumbine and Rev. A. U. Hutchins, the latter of whom acted as missionary of the New York State Convention of Universalists. He came as a supply pastor and worked faithfully to so reunite the society that a regular minister could be called.

Called as Pastor

Then on a Sunday, early in 1889, Rev. F. W. Betts of Palmer, Mass., supplied the pulpit. The result was that he was called as pastor and began his ministry on Nov. 1, 1889.

Dr. Betts faced a difficult task, a depleted society, a church building sadly in need of repairs, and a railroad close to the windows of the church, which interfered seriously with the services. There was urgent need of improvement, and church officials were weary through many difficult experiences and bitter disappointments.

Dr. Betts faced the situation frankly, taking up the problems of the society one by one. Almost immediately the fee pew and envelope system of financing the church was adopted. This was a radical innovation for those times, but it worked to the great satisfaction of the society.

[Syracuse, Onondaga Co.]

The income of the church was increased and then came the church debt problem. A committee was appointed, a thorough canvass made of every known Universalist in the city, and finally the money was raised to pay the debt of \$3,000. In raising it, there was an awakening of interest and an increased congregation. Repairs were made, the society was united and the people began looking forward to the future.

Gradually the neighborhood where the church stood was changing. Business was moving south. Families had also moved away.

Finally, in 1895, the property at the corner of S. Warren and E. Adams sts. was purchased. The cornerstone for a new church was laid in 1905, and the new church was dedicated Jan. 6, 1907.

Died in 1932

Dr. Betts died in March of 1932, and a short time later the name was changed to the Betts Memorial Universalist Church. There was a short interval before he was replaced, Rev. Ellsworth C. Reamon coming here from Lansing, Mich., Aug. 1, 1932.

One of the best known and most dearly loved men in Syracuse, Dr. Betts served as president of the State Convention of Universalists and for many years was a trustee of that organization, for 12 years a trustee of the [United States] general convention, a trustee of the Theological School of St. Lawrence University and on the university board. He served as president of the Associated Charities of Syracuse many years, was chairman of the moral survey committee, whose findings resulted in abolition of the so-called segregated district, and was later president of the public library board. He was also chairman of the Syracuse chapter of the American Red Cross.

Rev. Mr. Reamon, continuing the work of his successor [sic; should be predecessor], has served as a member of the board of trustees of the Universalist general convention, a member of the board of the Universalist National Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., a member of the fellowship committee of the state convention, and vice chairman of the Syracuse and Onondaga County Chapter of the American Red Cross. In addition, he is a member of the welfare council and of the board of the children's bureau.

Syracuse Journal, Syracuse NY, Sat. 15 Aug 1936

Transcribed on 21 Jun 2012 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY