

Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville
Oral Histories Collection

Rev. Richard R. Gross
Minister at Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville, North Carolina
July 1, 1963 - March 1, 1967

Recorded March, 1995

"Why do you want to leave such a successful church?" George Hartmann asked as he interviewed me. Because I have always wanted to take up the challenge presented by a Fellowship just granted Church status, I replied. George's curiosity was aroused because Keene Unitarian Church in Keene, New Hampshire, had recently completed a very successful expansion program that resulted in a new religious education complex. George evidently concluded that I was serious and encouraged the young and fledgling liberal church in Asheville, North Carolina, to hire me as its minister.

Hello. This is Richard Roland Gross, formerly minister of the Asheville Unitarian Church, from July 1, 1963 to March 1, 1967. I am now retired. Today, March 20, 1995, 28 years later, I am speaking from my home at 368 Furnace Hill Road, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania.

As I began my ministry at Asheville on July 1, 1963, I became acutely aware of the location of the church. Situated in the "land of the sky" it had become nationally known for its native son, Thomas Wolfe, and another celebrity, Billy Graham, whose stomping ground was only a few miles removed, in Black Mountain. At the outset, then, I encouraged the members of our church to seek three things:

- 1) Visibility. That is, making certain that the public knew we existed.
 - 2) Credibility. Not only to be visible, but to indicate our historical grounding in sound principles, foremost of which was individual freedom of religious belief.
- And thirdly, Accountability. That is, applying that principle, and others, to not only the immediate environs, but even as far south as Greenville, South Carolina, whose liberal residents claimed that they were in the buckle of the Bible belt.

No sooner did I start my ministry in Asheville than I was informed that Greenville's fellowship had requested permission for me to visit it on one Sunday evening a month. This was followed very shortly by invitations from other isolated liberals: Holston Valley, [near] Kingsport, Tennessee, Columbia and Spartanburg, both in South Carolina, Augusta and Athens in Georgia, and Catawba Valley Fellowship in Lenoir, and Raleigh Fellowship, both in North Carolina. In each of these areas I encouraged these come-outers to be visible, credible and accountable. To me it was a real joy to see them grow in the ensuing years. The greatest satisfaction was to see Greenville purchase its own house during my ministry. Members of our church from Hendersonville and Waynesville also requested me to visit them periodically.

In my semi-annual report of October 1963, I reported that our membership had grown from 115 to 127. I proposed at that time that the church appoint a long-range planning committee to explore any and all ideas concerning future growth and suggested that this could be expanded to a building committee.

Our church, along with many other churches throughout our country on November 24, 1963, observed a memorial service for our assassinated President John F. Kennedy. At that time I penned and read the following, entitled "Twilight Struggle:"

Aim of marksman true
Sharp steel in sinew silenced lips
Echoing justice, peace, hope.
Youngest heir to reach such acclaimed fame
Joins a triumvirate who shared his fate.
Battle-scarred, war was not to be his doom.
Twilight struggle would prove to fell him soon.
Cloudy skies cleared too soon,
Made slayer dare,
Releasing hate of sickened mind and heart.
A nation of free men ponders deeply,
Within, without, then within again.
Now here, now there,
One to another turns
Sharing the hurt that those before once bore.
Like them, they weep without shame,
Share the blame.
Thou that twilight struggle has just begun,
Thou lips mute by marksman and sharp steel true,
Shall speak forever, and free men shall endure.

In late 1963, our church school let it be known it was visible, credible and accountable when it fulfilled the principle of helping those who needed help to help themselves. At the Christmas and mid-winter festival of 1963 the children of the church school initiated the custom of presenting white gifts, that is, gifts wrapped in white paper, to be given in the spirit of this principle. The church school chose to adopt the Penland family, consisting of the mother, two boys, and a girl, all of whom were deserted by the father. The mother was making a valiant effort to keep the family together and appreciated our efforts in her behalf. Each class of the church school was sharing in this project in periodic intervals throughout the year. At this time, the church school had an average attendance of 27. We were using the UUA Beacon Series of religious education.

One of the most memorable experiences the Grosses enjoyed while at Asheville was the open house we held for the congregation on January 5, 1964. Especially did everyone enjoy the two punch bowls, one non-alcoholic and the other with a mixture of wine and juices. The fellowship flowed freely. When most of the people had gone, one member lingered and asked Gudrun, my wife, if he might have just one more cup of the punch. We all knew which one.

In the spring of 1964 our public relations committee launched a project that I encouraged very strongly, a series of radio programs entitled "Meet the Unitarians." We had no difficulty securing the ten-minute time slot from the local station WLOS. The format was for the minister to introduce a member of our church who would then speak about three to four minutes. Each speaker provided insights concerning his choice of Unitarianism as his or her religious philosophy. The members interviewed cut across all walks of life, from a

former newspaper editor, Walter Adams, to a cardiologist, Dr. Tim Takaro, from a chemist, Roger Guthrie, to an architect, William Moore, from a school teacher, Ann Upton, to a pipe-fitter, James Cooper, from Country Day teacher, community-minded citizen and mother Helen Reed to a former teacher of history, Martha Foster, from a church school teacher Lisa Andrews to a neurologist, surgeon and father, Larry Van Blaricom, and finally a young couple of the church, George and Anne Hartmann. As a chemist, Roger Guthrie then stated, "Unitarians tend to become confused over the mathematics of the Trinity. It has been said that Unitarians believe in one God, no devil, and 16 ounces to the pound. Like all generalizations, this one falls short of the whole truth. Let's examine it one belief at a time," he said. "All the Unitarians I know believe in honesty or sixteen ounces to the pound, but this is hardly a unique doctrine. It is merely one of the many beliefs we share with all men of good will whatever their religion. Like most thoughtful people in modern America, Unitarians have put aside all fear of hell and devils because we are convinced that they never existed. And," Roger continued, "Unitarians disagree among themselves as to the number of gods we should worship. Some prefer one, identified as a grown-up Jehovah. Some believe that there is something special about Jesus of Nazareth, entitling him to divine status. Some see no evidence for the existence of any God, unless the general orderliness of our natural universe is defined as God. " And Roger then asked, "What then is the common Unitarian denominator? It is simply the right and duty of good men to think for themselves, decide according to the best evidence available to them, and to change their minds as often as new evidence provokes new thoughts." And Roger concluded, "These Unitarians may all be wrong, but they do not fear the wrath of God for their errant thoughts. Any God worthy of our worship must be at least as kind and tolerant as the best of those who worship him."

As an architect, William Moore declared, "I am a member of the Unitarian church because it nourishes the spirit of free enquiry. I can attend this church with intellectual honesty, not because I agree with other Unitarians about a few basic theological principles, but because they would tolerate my disagreement." And he continued, "A search for truth must be combined with a reverence for principles long held to be true if one is to remain honest with himself." And William concluded, "Unitarians respect not only the right of any individual to pursue his own religious conviction, but also certain universal principles found in all religions of the world."

These interviews, such as you have just heard, were always followed by a summary statement attributed to such famous Unitarians William Ellery Channing, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Jefferson, Julia Ward Howe, and Eugene Navias of the UUA Department of Education. After this series of programs, we initiated a second series of four programs, during which I gave an historical background and basis for Unitarianism.

At about this time the Women's Alliance received a request from the Hill Street School for much needed clothing for its children. This school was basically comprised of African-American children. Its request was answered with emergency dispatch with knitted caps together with other items of clothing. Ladies who had knitted these caps remarked with great enjoyment, some time later, how they had observed one day the children wearing these same caps. Subsequent visits to the school revealed from its principal, Mrs. Rita Lee, that each of the teachers had begun a friendly rivalry for this clothing for their individual students.

Several of our members like Ruth Melcher and Helen Reed participated actively in the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization and the League of Women Voters. Both organizations pursued as their project the registration of African Americans for the coming elections. They set as their goal the establishment of a permanent registration for Asheville to replace the haphazard manner in which it was then done.

On March 15, 1964, Rabbi Bernard Bloom of the local reform temple Beth HaTephila and I engaged in a conversation sermon on the subject of the Passover.

To celebrate spring and the Easter festival on March 29, 1964, we used as our theme of the service "Let the Flowers Speak." At various points throughout the service flowers were presented, first by the congregation to let the flowers speak of springtime, then children from ages one through eight, to let the flowers speak of Jesus, then children from ages nine and up to symbolize the welcoming of new members into our church. Finally, I asked everyone to let the flowers speak of life's seasons. It was a memorable service.

Wherever and whenever the church building needed maintenance and repair, the men came forward and answered the call. Henry Walter, Joe Brooks, Norman Poultney and Hal Reed were especially dedicated in these efforts.

Our church initiated efforts to organize the Blue Ridge Memorial Society, in cooperation with the Catawba Valley Unitarian Fellowship. The official organization occurred on April 26, 1964 in our church at 120 Vermont Avenue. The Memorial Society was an organization dedicated to simplicity, dignity and economy in funeral practices.

The Allen High School Choir was invited to our service about this time. This helped establish a relationship with this school, a private school for African American girls. After this service, our members were assigned girls whom they would host for dinner. The relationship resulted in my being invited several times to speak at their chapel services.

Prior to my arrival, several members of our church had become very much involved in helping to break down segregation at the fast food restaurants. This led to my forming a close relationship with Mr. W. E. Roland, a local jeweler, who took it upon himself to work with the African American young people in his area, in their efforts to break down the barriers of segregation. The group, known as Asheville Student Congress for Racial Equality [Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality or ASCORE] welcomed my help which was rewarded one evening when I received a telephone call from one of them proclaiming that they finally broke that barrier and now might enter these restaurants for service unmolested.

Our church's junior and senior LRY [Liberal Religious Youth] met monthly. Discussion meetings were held at church, social meetings were held at homes of members, in the church, or in the case of a camping trip in the outdoors. Topics of discussion for the junior LRY were Socrates, racial relations, Old Testament history, Jesus, Servetus, all of which were acted out and recorded on the church's tape recorder and played back to an enthusiastic church audience. Topics for the senior LRY were God, values, money, the church, and boy and girl relations. Social affairs included both groups: a camping trip, a Halloween party, and a dance. In May 1964, the senior LRY was in complete charge of the youth Sunday service.

The Women's Alliance continued its project for needy children of the Hill Street School. The church school also held a Christmas party for the Hill Street School, when our school children presented the Hill Street children with a check for fifty dollars.

In late 1964 the Long Range Planning Committee asked members to begin scanning surrounding territory of Asheville for a suitable church site.

Throughout this year of 1964, key speakers at our church included Robert Walsh, Kingsport, Tennessee, today a fully-fellowshipped Unitarian Universalist minister, George Carleton, Catawba Valley Fellowship at Hickory, Dr. Ivan Parkins, professor of government at Asheville-Biltmore College, and Jack Hopkins, a member of our church.

In early 1965, our senior LRY began meeting weekly under the leadership of John Kiely. Some of its members went to Huntsville, Alabama to meet with other members of the Dixie Federation of LRY.

On March 14, 1965, our church held a memorial service for James Reeb, Unitarian Universalist minister, killed in the civil rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama. At that time, I read a poem I penned:

Let us break bread together said three that night in Selma.
We know no taboo against other hue,
As we sup this night in Selma.
No one breaks bread together, said four that night in Selma.
We have a taboo against other hue.
One must die this night in Selma.
Let us break bread together said two
This day in Selma.
Let the whole wide world know
Someday none need forego
To break bread together,
Yes, even in Selma.

On Palm Sunday morning, 1965, the senior LRY group served breakfast to the whole congregation, and the senior LRY group attended the district meeting in Charlotte during the Easter vacation.

The next week, our church received a visit from Dana Greeley, then President of the UUA. He spoke both at our church and on the local television channel, WLOS-TV on March 23, 1965. From Asheville he was making his way to Selma, Alabama, to participate in the civil rights demonstrations.

We were very proud of our young people when the senior LRY led the entire service on Youth Sunday in April 1965. At that service they presented excellent original poetry and Diana Reed presented the sermon.

In June 1965 a call went out to all Unitarian Universalist ministers in the district to join in the civil rights demonstrations in Jackson, Mississippi. The response was excellent. While

there, I especially learned what it feels like to be in the other person's shoes. I also experienced real fear, for one never knew what awaited us marchers as we made our way to the capitol. One thing I will never forget is the hatred in the eyes of the bystanders. One of the honors I had during that time in Jackson was to offer a prayer at one of the freedom rallies in Pearl Street Church in Jackson. This was offered on June 30, 1965:

God of the human heart,

We rejoice to be able to meet in this building this evening in Jackson, Mississippi. We never thought we would be here, some of us. Now we are together. Today we celebrate a victory for people of Jackson. We can now march to the Capitol. We can assemble peaceably. We meet as human beings. Some people in Jackson do not consider some of us as human beings. We must look to the day when on the face of this earth we can talk to each other with our hearts, and when brotherhood will be in the heart of every man in this universe. Amen.

A memorable service on December 12, 1965, was that in which I spoke on toys and their influence on the culture of that time. I used as a part of the service thirteen television commercials, all of which had as their focus toys of violence. At the end of the service, Wolfgang [Gross] sang this: [recording of Wolfgang and choir singing "Where Have All the Flowers Gone"]

Begin Side B:

In late 1965, the Social Responsibility Committee, under the leadership of Evelyn Pait, initiated the annual Human Relations Award of the Unitarian Church of Asheville. A request was sent out to all of our members on January 31, 1966, to fulfill the resolution passed at the Semi-Annual Meeting of our church in October of 1965, and the request announced that the Committee was now receiving nominations for the Human Relations Award for the year 1965. According to the resolution, the honor was to be conferred upon that individual who, in the opinion of the Committee and the congregation at large, evidence for Buncombe County during the calendar year of 1965, those qualities which promote salutary relations among human beings regardless of race, creed or political affiliation. Nominations for this award were to be sent to the Unitarian Church in care of the Committee between February 1 and February 14, 1966. All nominations were to be in writing, include supported reasons, and have the consent of the nominee. Upon the cessation of nominations and as soon thereafter as was feasible, the committee in a duly called meeting would, by simple majority vote, select from all names submitted those three which in its opinion merited the award. On March 4, 1966, at the Church's specially called Program Proposals Hearing Dinner at Horn's Restaurant, the Committee would submit its report. The Congregation would then determine by a simple majority vote, employing a secret ballot, the winner of the award. All three nominees would be invited to attend a banquet at Grove Park Inn, to be held on April 13, Jefferson's birthday anniversary, at which time the announcement of the winner would first be made. The Committee chose as the first speaker for this event Harry Golden, who graciously accepted. The three nominees were Mrs. Leslie A. Stradley, the Reverend William S. Jones, and Mr. William E. Roland. Mrs. Stradley, along with other qualifications, was a member of the Asheville Human Relations Council, President of the League of Women Voters, and an advocate of permanent voter registration. The Reverend Mr. Jones was the first white minister to become pastor of Calgary United Presbyterian Church, predominately Negro. Mr. Roland was advisor to

Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality, when that group was instrumental in opening public libraries, restrooms and lunch counters to persons of all races. Ticket sales numbered 330 and an attendance was recorded of 315. Mr. William E. Roland received the award. Mr. Harry Golden's fee of \$200 was donated to the Golden Negro Voting Fund while an unofficial balance of \$234.54 after all expenses was placed in a special Unitarian Scholarship Fund for needy students in the Asheville area. The award Banquet festivities appeared on WLOS-TV local television channel. The significance of this event was immeasurable.

In February 1966, I held a dialogue sermon with Rabbi Stanley Feinstein, Temple Beth HaTephila, on the Second Ecumenical Council, The Jews and Amnesia. Rabbi Feinstein later invited me to conduct a service at Temple Beth HaTephila and to attend a Bar Mitzvah. At one of the services, a lady seated behind us leaned forward to say, "If you attend any more services you will have to become members."

In March of 1966 the Women's Alliance launched another project: An annual rummage sale. With blood, sweat and tears, the women with the help of some of the dedicated men-folk held a rummage sale that surpassed any expectations by those who participated. The sale, held in an empty downtown store at 31 Biltmore Avenue, was announced to open at 9:00 am. But a long line of prospective customers was already there at 8:00 am. A special camaraderie was formed. Gudrun, my wife, recalls how beautifully the display window of the store was decorated and the fun that was had by all. The profit from the sale exceeded \$300.

In May of 1966 a special fundraising project sponsored by the Hill Street Baptist Church was held for the retirement of Mrs. Rita Lee, Hill Street School Principal. Many of our members attended to wish her well.

In May of 1966 I served as Chairman of the Biracial Committee for Free Elections, a committee formed to focus public attention on the practice of city and county employees being elected as Democratic precinct officers. This practice resulted in a lot of irregularities at these precincts. Our committee corresponded with the North Carolina State Board of Elections, the United States Attorney General, the Solicitor of the General Buncombe County Court, the Attorney General of North Carolina and the Buncombe County Board of Elections. It was eventually determined by the State Attorney General that a political party precinct chairman is not a public officer, and there is no Constitutional provision which prohibits a public official from serving as a precinct chairman. Our committee investigation, however, did bring some results. A special reminder was sent from the Civil Service Board to all city employees who were members of the classified service that they were prohibited from participating actively in the election of any candidate for public office. Despite this warning, Paul Dutcher, a captain in the city engineering department, was arrested for acting as an election worker in violation of the Civil Services Act. A month later, in June 1966, the mayor's brother, Tom Eller, was charged with defrauding a voter who had asked him for help in the voting booth. He pulled levers other than the one the voter specified. Sawyer, the voter, had asked for help because he could not see well. Eller was also charged with violating election laws by serving as an election official in a precinct in which he did not live.

In my semi-annual report in October 1966, I reported a membership of 138 and an average attendance of 54. Our church school had an average attendance of 30. Our newsletter was being sent to 190 persons throughout the area. Our long-range planning committee was diligently at work, but was somewhat frustrated at a lack of response from the congregation. Our church set a new record for contributions to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, \$278.66.

One of the most meaningful services I remember was that of December 18, 1966, when the Grosses participated in a conversation sermon, Thoughts About Christmas. Gudrun, Wolfgang then twelve, Monika then nine, and I covered the various facets of Christmas, Yule log, the Roman god Saturn, the birth of Jesus, the music of Christmas, the Christmas stocking, the winter equinox, and Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. At this point Monika and Wolfgang spoke of their experience with Hanukkah. The Grosses had invited Rabbi Stanley Feinstein and his family to our house, at which time Rabbi Feinstein stated that children in Jewish families, rather than receiving all of the gifts on Christmas as we did, gave children a gift each of the eight days of Hanukkah. At one point in our service, Wolfgang exhibited his musical talents by playing several Christmas numbers on a trumpet. Those who attended this service found it to be memorable.

Throughout my ministry I was invited to speak at a variety of organizations in Asheville. Women's Group of Trinity Episcopal Church, Book Review Club, Men's Group of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Memorial Mission Hospital Chapel services, Protestants and Other Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Beverly Hills Baptist Church, American Humanist Association, and Highland Hospital Vesper Service. Outside the environs of Asheville, I spoke at Waynesville Kiwanis International.

When we left on March 1, 1967, the church was poised for facing its next level of achievement, that of a building program. Now that the three challenges we originally confronted had been met, Visibility, Credibility and Accountability, we decided to enter a new period of our lives, that of social work. First, with the North Carolina Heart Association and then with Children's Programs in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, after I had earned my Master of Social Work degree at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Bob Potter: Shortly after sending this tape to me, Rev. Gross sent me a letter. This is Bob Potter speaking, to record a quotation from that letter, dated March 23, 1995. This is a quotation: I would be remiss if I did not include in this history of my ministry in Asheville, the influence of a most remarkable person, Mrs. Lillian Lindsey. Mrs. Lindsey, Miss Lillian to many, was known for her way of spreading love in our church to both our nursery children and their parents. One incident that Gudrun remembers most vividly transpired one Sunday morning when some of the very young fledglings were unusually restless and upset. When Freda Van Blaricom entered the room used for our nursery to assist Miss Lillian, Freda was kindly advised that she did not know how to take care of babies. Freda had to turn her face to avoid having Miss Lillian see her explode in laughter. To gather the real significance of this remark you must realize that Freda was the mother of six children. At our open house in January 1964, Miss Lillian proved to be the center of attention in our kitchen as she graciously accepted accolades for the delicious food she had helped prepare.

End of recording