

people soup

youth groups

July, 1980



Alan Brink

ISSN: 036-8247

copyright 1980 by Liberal Religious Youth, Inc., Boston, MA.

Liberal Religious Youth
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108
(617) 742-2105 x370

A HISTORY OF UU YOUTH MOVEMENTS By Rev. Wayne Arnason

I am pleased to have the opportunity to write this brief history of LRY and the youth movements before it for People Soup, but it has also been an awkward chore for me. As some of you reading this may know, I have completed a detailed 140 page book on the history of the Unitarian and Universalist Youth movements. It is entitled *Follow the Gleam*, and it has been published only recently. It is not easy to boil 140 pages down to one Soup-length article. In spite of that, I wanted to take this opportunity because I think history is terribly important, and most LRYers have no idea why the movement they are a part of is where it is at today, how it got there, and who was involved in its creation and growth. Very few people have any sense of the continuity of our youth movement.

There is continuity, however. Indeed, there are patterns that have remained fairly constant over the years. Most people are aware that many notable leaders within the Unitarian Universalist movement began their denominational involvement through the youth groups. In spite of this connection, there has always been a high degree of ambivalence and tension between the churches and their youth counterparts.

LRYers at the local and regional levels have in recent years been critical of the continental level of LRY for its alienation from the grass roots, its inefficiency, and its spending habits. This same complaint echoes all through the movement's history. Tensions and differences between the various structural levels of the movement have always existed. They reflect the same lack of commitment to centralized institutional framework that characterized the adult churches.

The continental LRY leaders of today grapple with the problem of how to be helpful and relevant to the people at the local level. Yet even when the youth organization was centered mainly in New England, the jump from regional to national or continental office has always represented a quantum leap in perspective and in problems for the people involved.

Finally, meeting the needs of college age people within the youth movement has always been a difficult and usually disappointing task.

I do not wish to point out merely the continuities over the ninety years of the youth movement's history. The second goal of my narrative is to indicate the changes as well. How had the LRY of today, a unique, continent-wide youth organization incorporated, staffed and governed exclusively by people from the ages of fourteen to nineteen, evolved out of a young people's movement brought into being by a small group of New England ministers near the turn of the century?

A dominant theme within our youth movement over the years is summarized in the slogan "youth autonomy". At first glance it appears that "youth autonomy" has been a guiding principle in our approach to youth programming, right from the beginning. In the 1924 "youth issue" of the *Universalist Leader*, Stanley Manning, Director of Young People's work within the Universalist Convention for four and one half years, wrote: "The first joy to be found in such a position is the discovery that no

cont. on p. 3

Non-profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Boston, MA #8652

