

Something New This Year!

It sometimes surprises me that this is my sixth year with the Fellowship! It was July of 1999 when Kathy and I moved to Carbondale, and it feels like things have been hopping since then. The Fellowship's transition to professional ministry, and my own transitions into the ministry and fatherhood were followed quickly by our strategic planning process, feasibility study, capital campaign, building project, and last year's move from Elm and University to Parrish Lane. With the sale of our old building, and the dedication ceremony, we've completed a program of activity that has required and has received generous amounts of financial, emotional, and physical effort.

Of course, during all that activity, the Fellowship has continued to do what it's here for. We aren't here as a real estate venture, but rather to provide a plentiful array of opportunities for the religious education of our children and the personal and spiritual growth of our adults. We are here to change not only ourselves, but the world around us, as well. A very partial listing of our collaborative efforts could include Rainbow Cafe, the Empty Bowls project on behalf of Good Samaritan Ministries, the "Let's Send a Clear Message" tax refund contribution program in 2000, and our ongoing AIDS/Africa work with Hospice of Southern Illinois and SIUC's Public Policy Institute. And these are only examples of what we have been up to -- I'm sure that you can think of many other notable aspects of the Fellowship's work over the past six years. We've been busy, and we've accomplished a lot!

As you may know, my agreement with the Fellowship includes provision for sabbatical leave, with a month of earned sabbatical accruing for each year of my ministry here. Periodic ministerial sabbaticals are recommended as a period of refreshment and renewal, for both the congregation and the minister. Many of my colleagues who have taken sabbatical time talk about the new energy, enthusiasm, and ideas that they bring back from sabbaticals, as well as a sense of a fresh start in their congregational efforts. And the congregation, from its perspective, often has both new ideas and a new appreciation of its capabilities.

In consultation with the Committee on Ministry and the Fellowship's Board of Trustees, I have developed a plan to use three months of my accrued sabbatical leave to study 19th century Unitarians and Universalists in southern Illinois. Did you know that there were Universalist congregations in Mt. Pleasant (between Anna-Jonesboro and Vienna) and in Shiloh Hill (in northwestern Jackson County)? Neither did I, until I spent a few days in the library at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago last August! And there were other congregations in our area, as well!

Next June and July, I will be "away" on sabbatical, even though I will be here in town. I will try to learn what can be learned about these congregations and their members. Between now and then, I will use a third month of sabbatical time to do work in preparation; for instance, while we are in New England visiting Kathy's family, I will spend a few days in the Harvard Divinity School archives reviewing the Universalist Church of America and American Unitarian Association records concerning these

congregations and their leaders. I also anticipate additional trips to Chicago, and possible visits to older UU congregations that may have historical archives, to the state historical society, and to the locations of the congregations themselves.

My sabbatical plan identifies groups within the Fellowship that will take on additional responsibilities while I am away. The Sunday Services Committee, for instance, will coordinate the planning and conduct of our Sunday services during those two months, and the Pastoral Friends will provide pastoral support in my absence. Since I will be in town, for most of the time, I will be available in the event of a death (or other trauma of that serious magnitude). You'll hear more of these details as the sabbatical gets closer!

In the meantime, my best wishes to you and yours for a joyous, fulfilling, and renewing year in 2005! Happy New Year!

(signed) Bill S.