

# A History Lesson: the Consolidation of the Unitarian and Universalist Faiths

by John Cummins

When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America finally merged on May 12, 1961, a grand total of 141,685 members of 895 congregations became one. America's leading religious Journal at the time, *The Christian Century*, called it, "the most thorough sounding of the views of a religious people in modern times!" And well it might! In plebiscite after plebiscite, members of every congregation, everywhere, over a period of several years, were solicited for their views.

And express themselves they did! One Back Bay matron was heard to sniff that Universalists were 'nothing but Baptists who could read! Universalists complained that Unitarians didn't feel they'd had a good sermon unless they didn't quite understand it themselves.

Universalism, a populist movement, swept Westward with the great American migration of the 19th century, while Unitarians, but for a few Western outposts, remained largely in New England. Yet for more than a century they had shared many of the same ministers and views. Thomas Starr King {photo} a Universalist minister from New Hampshire, was one of the first to hold fellowship in both movements.

And both movements were unitarian in belief. The Universalist theologian, Hosea Ballou, {photo} in his 1805 *Treatise on the Atonement* had decried the Doctrine of the Trinity fourteen years before William Ellery Channing {photo} threw down the gauntlet before Orthodoxy in his Baltimore address of 1819. It was not strange that they should do so. After all, Jews had been unitarian for 5,000 years.

In truth, both movements had suffered the ravages of a world war and The Great Depression when two young ministers were called to lead and revitalize their movements: Fredrick Eliot from St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1937, and my father, Robert Cummins, from Pasadena, California, in 1938. With headquarters across the street from each other {photo}, both immediately saw the need for a combined effort.

The Council of Liberal Churches, Inc. became a reality on October 8, 1953, with a service of dedication in the chapel at "25". The first step to full organic merger had been taken.

Of course, being good UUs we had to discuss the matter for another decade. Uniting proved only slightly more complex than merging, say, General Electric with General Motors. In poll after poll, the desperate Merger Commission sent out more than 140,000 pieces of literature.

There *were* differences, both organizational and theological. The Universalists were not poor, but their money was held in State Conventions. The Unitarians were not rich, but their money was concentrated in Boston. Universalists were accustomed to biennial conventions out across the country. Unitarians had their beloved May Meetings annually and always at the foot of Beacon

Hill.

Misconceptions and not a few anomalies prevailed. Universalists tended to be viewed as conservative, but it was *they* who launched the experimental Charles Street Meeting House across from stately, staid old Arlington Street Church. Unitarians were viewed as radical, but it was *they* whose national journal was called The Christian Register. Go figure!

And all feared the loss of identity. While the simple name of United Liberal Church might seem logical, it was clear that both denominational names had to be included in an appellation, which, to this day, remains a bit awkward and too lengthy to conveniently write on a check. And so we settle, at least among ourselves, for calling ourselves "UUs".

As merger grew closer, a host of issues and their advocates grew more intense. Before final ratification, no less than 23 amendments were made to the merger agreement. *We love* amendments!

Particularly fraught was the 1959 General Assembly in which the greatest debate was whether to add specific reference to Christianity in Article II, which outlined the principles and purposes of the new UUA. The two general assemblies met separately; they met together; they met late into the night; but in the joint session, there was only reference to "the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition."

An estimated 2000 UUs gathered in Symphony Hall Boston, for a Service of Celebration. Two pulpits were used: That of the Oxford Church in which Ballou had been ordained; and that of the Federal Street Church from which Channing had preached. The principal address was; "A New World Faith."

The Grand Experiment was under way!