

Greetings from the Sabbatical!

As August begins, my time away from the Fellowship is coming to an end, and I look forward to seeing each one of you again in a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I'd like to let you know what I have been up to, so here is a quick summary of how my sabbatical research has gone.

As you know, one of the main intentions of my sabbatical was to begin a study of the history of Unitarians and Universalists in southern Illinois. At the very beginning of the research, about this time last year, I knew of two active Unitarian Universalist congregations in the area: Alton and Carbondale. And I knew that there had been a long-defunct Universalist church in Mount Pleasant, and another, that had "closed its doors" within the past ten years in Waltonville (just southwest of Mount Vernon). And I wondered if there might have been any others, and what I might be able to find out about their stories.

At this point, I know a bit more. I know that if we divide the state of Illinois into northern and southern halves, drawing an east/west line through Springfield, that the southern half contains four active UU congregations (Alton, Carbondale, Charleston, and Mount Vernon) and a dormant congregation in Waltonville. And I know that it has, at various times, been the location of about thirty other former Universalist congregations, and about five other Unitarian ones. Some of them were pretty close to us, in Harrisburg, Chester, and Shiloh Hill, though those congregations were short-lived – their stories begin in the 1860s and end in the 1870s. Others began at about the same time and lasted to the time of the Great Depression, or even into the 1960s.

I've begun to understand that there is a LOT more to learn about. In the meantime, I have pulled much of the information that I have gleaned so far into a preliminary report. I'm working with several of the Fellowship's internet gurus to create a section of the Fellowship website entitled "Unitarians and Universalists in Southern Illinois," which should be available by the end of August (perhaps sooner). If you care to do so, you can see what I have been doing while I have been "away," and if you have any information that might help, I'll be happy to have it. The website will also be available to anyone interested in the history of our movement in this region. As my responsibilities to my family and the Fellowship permit, I plan to continue working on this project into the future.

Have I discovered anything interesting? I think so! Did you know there were female ministers, both Universalist and Unitarian, serving congregations in the southern part of this state in the 1880s and 1890s? Did you know that Unitarians and Universalists held joint Chautauquas in Shelby County in the 1890s? Did you know that the Shelby County Unitarians held a flower service – not the one that we use, which was created in Prague in the 1920s, but a different, though perhaps similar one – in the 1890s? Did you know that the much larger presence of Unitarian and Universalist congregations in the northern half of the state can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that New Yorkers and New Englanders tended to settle there, rather than further south? Once the website is up, you

can visit to find out more about these “discoveries.” And I expect that there will be more to come!

In the meantime, I have enjoyed greeting you at the Farmer’s Market, or Kroger, or McLeod Theater, or the library, or wherever we may have seen each other! I hope that you, too, have had a refreshing and renewing summer! See you at the Fellowship – soon!

Yours in the spirit, (signed) Bill S.