

Our History

What do you do when you move to a town that doesn't have a congregation that aligns with your faith? In 1822, Thomas Jefferson remarked that his neighborhood was too "slender" to be able to organize a Unitarian church, so he had to practice on his own.

But, if you were a Unitarian in Midcentury America, the American Unitarian Association granted you permission to start a Unitarian Fellowship by gathering just nine other people and organizing a congregation on your own! No minister required.

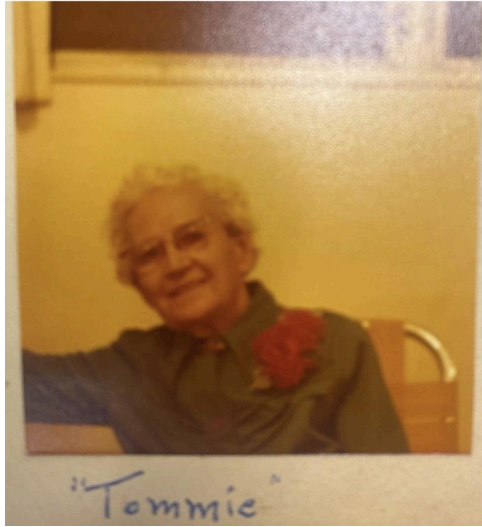
It was a radical idea, but that's exactly what Patsy Eger did when she moved from Washington DC to Lakeland, FL in the early 1950s.

The first attempt to start a fellowship in 1952 was unsuccessful. However, Eger, along with Ellinore Dettman (who eventually took charge of creating a Sunday school for the many children that began to arrive at the Fellowship), did not give up! On November 20, 1955, thirty-five charter members signed the membership book and the



Lake Region Unitarian Fellowship was formed. Today, we call ourselves the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland.

The Fellowship first began to meet at the Danforth Chapel on the Florida Southern College campus (did you know that Frank Lloyd Wright was a life-long Unitarian?). But, in 1959, when one college president retired and another one came in, the Unitarians were asked to leave. Fortunately for the LRUF, Cleo "Tommie" Thomas had just signed the membership book, and at 71 years of age, she was a go-getter!



Tommie searched the city for a meeting place and finally found the property, the former Dora Cox Phillips School, at 3140 Troy Ave. The price: \$6,700. The amount of cash in the LRUF account: \$300. That didn't stop Tommie! She organized the Fellowship people, raised enough money for a down payment, and convinced them that they could fix up the property themselves. And they did!

Members built the patio benches using donated lumber, and held a fund-raising pancake breakfast to cover the cost. With money tight, pink lawn chairs served as the "pews" in the worship space (look at that chair that Tommie is sitting in!).

In early 1961, a \$6000 expansion plan was proposed despite the reality that the total assets of the fellowship at that time was 49 cents! But the Fellowship was growing and the people knew they could pull together and make it happen! The "auditorium" (now the Social Hall) where all worship services and socializing took place, was increased by 20 feet, with a platform added on the south end. What is now the Social Hall closet was once where the pulpit stood. Check out that wallpaper background! It looks like they replaced those pink lawn chairs with the-style-of-the-day brown vinyl chairs, too (we finally replaced those in 2019!). Unitarians are pretty groovy!



Nineteen sixty-one was a big year for Unitarians nationwide, as the American Unitarian Association merged with the Universalist General Convention to form our current denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association. The LRUF became the Lake Region Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Fellowships were unique in that it was the lay people that organized, governed, and provided programming for the group. Throughout the 1960s, the LRUUF created their own lay-led services, but they called on ministers from other Unitarian Universalist churches in Florida to fill their pulpit on occasion. While the LRUUF enjoyed the freedom to govern themselves and build their own unique religious fellowships, they realized that creating worship services was a lot of work and they wanted to fund ministry and bring professionals to the pulpit. In 1971, the Fellowship hired its first minister, the Rev. Richard Norsworthy of Clearwater. He served one Sunday a month from January 1971 – May 1972. He was succeeded in October 1972 by the Rev. David Scheyer of Ft. Lauderdale, who held the part-time ministry until November 1976. After several months without a minister, the Fellowship hired the Rev. Carl Westman, who

served as part-time minister from September 1977 – November 1986. Ultimately, Unitarian Universalists appreciate being led by ministers who can offer spiritual wisdom and a wide variety of religious topics to explore. Having a minister did indeed also lead to growth!

In 1987, the Fellowship voted to build a new Sanctuary. Once again, the people of the Fellowship pulled together and made it happen! Constructed with labor and materials donated by members, the Sanctuary was dedicated on November 20, 1988, with the Rev. John DeWolf-Hurt, the Co-District Executive, giving the keynote address: “Church, Chalice and Challenge.”

We still enjoy this sanctuary today! It is our spiritual home, our sacred space. It has held a variety of worship services for all ages, weddings, and celebration of life services. It has seen Halloween parties, celebratory dinners, concerts, karaoke, and punk rock shows! We’ve opened it up for workshops and meetings that align with our social justice program and UU values. Our sanctuary is a place of welcoming and affirmation for LGBTQ+ people, people of many different backgrounds and experiences, people on a wide variety of spiritual paths.





Unitarian Universalists have always been open-minded truth seekers, enjoying the freedom of growing and learning together. Today, we participate in a shared ministry between the members of our congregation and our Spiritual Life Director, Heather Norby, who joined UUCL in 2007. The congregation sent Heather to Meadville Lombard Theological School in 2019. She graduated in 2024 with a Master of Arts in Religion. The subject of her master's thesis was the history of Universalism and Unitarianism in Lakeland, FL. Our congregation today reflects the history of our DIY fellowship spirit and a desire for professional ministry!

To read more about our fascinating history (did you know that the founder of Lakeland, Abraham Munn, was a Unitarian from Lexington, KY? Did you know that there was a Universalist movement in Lakeland in the early 20th century, led by the founder of the Lakeland Women's Club?), please see [Heather's thesis](#).