

Unitarian Universalists acquire new church building

by Tom Cowan
Staff Writer

Unitarianism has been around a long time but it has only recently come to Brevard. Now with a membership of around 100, the Unitarian Universalists of Transylvania County have their own building. Several members are former Christian ministers.

One thing newcomers to Brevard quickly notice is that we have a lot of churches. No doubt Brevard is a very religious community. Located in the heart of the Bible belt, Transylvania County is home to around 87 Churches. Some of them sit right across the street from each other. The numerousness of Transylvania churches is not only the result of the number of people who worship but it is also due number of divisions within the Christian community. The Southern Baptist and the Methodist are the largest groups, followed by the Catholics, the Presbyterians and the Episcopal. In Brevard we also have a few much smaller religious groups, consisting of a hundred members or less. These include the Quakers, who congregate in the Public Child Care Center, the Jews, who meet in The Sacred Hart Catholic Church, and the Unitarians Universalists (UU) who used to meet in the McLarty-Goodson building on campus, but have since acquired their own building on the corner of Broad and Varsity Street.

What do the Unitarian Universalists teach? UU member, John Waldo is a perfect example of someone who discovered the teachings of the UU through his own life experience. Raised in a strict Catholic family in southern Louisiana he joined the priesthood as a young man in 1950 and he moved to India to do mission work in 1958. He was forced to leave India for political reasons in 1965 and he moved to Brazil the same year. He stayed in Brazil until 1968 and left the priesthood in 1970. He later got a masters degree in clinical social work and started a career as a psychotherapist.

In his travels, Waldo said he experienced things he never expected. He saw people of many different religions who were able to live fulfilling lives despite living in relative poverty, he saw cohesive families and communities, and he saw people living with greater fearlessness' and acceptance of life and death.

In describing why he left the priesthood Waldo explained how his experiences overseas had changed his view of reality

in a way that did not accord with the Catholic Church. As part of his life realization Waldo said "I realized that the people who had told me right from wrong were really not at a higher level than me." He also said "In my late 30s, the largely repressed rebelliousness that would have been normal in my teenage years began to catch up with me. This was to the point where I needed to give myself the freedom to seek a personal independence which would have been prohibited had I continued as a Catholic priest."

While no longer a priest Waldo has remained very spiritual having since had the belief that one should remain open to spiritual development through personal life experience. This is also a major belief of the Unitarian Universalists who generally feel that all beliefs should remain open to questioning and development. In 2001, shortly after moving to Brevard, Waldo joined the Unitarian Universalists of Transylvania County (UUTC). He served two year's on the UUTC's board of directors helping them acquire their new building in early 2004.

The UUTC started with around 15 people in 1999. They congregated on the Brevard College campus and their current reverend, Ernie Mills, was then the Brevard College Chaplain and a Methodist minister since 1992. Mills became reverend of the UUTC in 2002.

Interesting, the origins of Unitarianism also go back to a green mountainous place called Transylvania (now part of Romania). The congregation started in the 1560s when the Protestant reformation had taken hold in the area and broken the Catholic Church into many different Christian sects that often disputed one another. Frances David, an influential court preacher, had converted from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism and finally to his newly discovered faith Unitarianism. Unitarianism was accepted by his King with the hope that it would end religious unrest and bring unity within the diversity of religion. Frances David said "We need not think alike to love alike." The congregation continues today with the belief that there is no one Trinity that fully is representative of God. They believe in the necessity to follow Jesus but not worship him.

Unitarians spread through various parts of Europe and not surprisingly they suffered a long history of persecution. In the late eighteenth century before Unitari-

anism spread to America, a very similar religious movement had developed indigenously in several parts of the north and southeastern United States. Known as the Universalists, they were people who abandoned strict Christian doctrines and believed that God embraced people of all religions, races, and social classes. Universalists were very active in Social justice movements. They embraced the motto "deeds not creeds." They often broke the law to defend fugitive slaves. The Universalists denomination became the first to ordain women to their ministry beginning in 1863, with a freed slave Olympia Brown.

In the mid twentieth century the Unitarian and Universalists began to fully become aware of each other and their commonalities. It became clear that they could become greater voice for religious unity if they themselves merged together. The Unitarian Universalists Association was formed in 1961.

Today in Brevard, the UUTC membership has grown to around 100 people. They are recognized by the State as a religious society and a non-profit organization. They are privately funded, mainly by annual pledge drives. Their main services are on Sunday mornings, normally during which time they sing songs and teach basic religious principles such as their seven bylaws. Other groups meetings occur throughout the week, such as men's groups, women's groups, child daycare and religious education groups. The UUTC also hold discussion forums and spiritually related classes such as meditation classes. Their social actions committee meets regularly to try to organize charities and things that benefit the community and the world. They are responsible for starting TCVM, a local volunteer medical service facility for the poor. More information including an events calendar is available at www.uutc.org.

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they have been on that particular trail. Keep these things in mind, always be aware of your surroundings, be as safe as possible, and practice "leave no trace" which basically means leave the area better than you found it. Try this trail out, try any of them out but plan ahead and make sure you know what you're getting into. Have a good time out there.