

First Parish of Northfield Unitarian – Northfield, Massachusetts

Corner of Parker Ave and Main Street

In 1673, the first English families to arrive in Northfield worshipped outdoors under a big oak tree at the south end of Main Street, led by Elder William Janes. These early settlers typically held worship services in private homes, often selecting one with a large kitchen to hold the congregation. For much of the first fifty years of its existence, Northfield was truly a frontier outpost: both part of the push to displace the indigenous peoples of the area, and a marker of English expansion west from the Atlantic and also up the Connecticut River. Like other English outposts in the area, Northfield was not only a threat to earlier indigenous inhabitants who resisted European expansion into the area, but a challenge to New France, where French colonists sought to expand southward along the Connecticut and other waterways. The outpost at Northfield was attacked, destroyed and abandoned several times between 1673 and 1716, and its European inhabitants participated in many of the wars of the eighteenth century which embroiled the region.

In 1716, the English community in Northfield decided that it needed a minister, and built a house “16 feet long and 12 wide” as an enticement. Mr. James Whitmore, trained at Yale College, was hired for half a year. The motivation to have a minister and build a church was not purely religious – to become a town in Massachusetts, a community had to have a church.

In November 1717, Rev. Benjamin Doolittle began to preach, at what was then the only church in the new settlement. By February 1718, it was clear that the house built for Mr. Whitmore was inadequate for Rev. Doolittle and his new wife, and a new residence was sought. In March, the town decided to build a new meeting house, and it was recommended that it be “45 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 18 feet between joints.” By August it had been enclosed and stood right in the middle of Main Street, a little south-east of the present church. Abijah Prince, Doolittle’s twelve-year-old African slave, arrived with them. First Parish --which was a Congregational church at the time—was the community’s first church, and the one that enabled Northfield to incorporate as a town in 1723.

Rev. Doolittle -- who was also a physician-- served the town in both capacities until his death in 1749, but was a controversial figure, accused of heterodoxy, spending too much time doctoring up and down the Connecticut valley, neglecting his ministerial duties, and owning a slave which was troubling to other people in town. At least twenty other ministers in western Massachusetts owned slaves in the early 1700s, but in Northfield slave ownership was rare. Young Abijah Prince worked in the Doolittles' home and on their fields, and occasionally for other families in town. Mr. Prince later moved to Deerfield, served as soldier in some of the frontier fighting, married Lucy Terry in 1756, and obtained his manumission papers in 1761. Mr. and Mrs. Prince later moved to Guilford, Vermont.





THE OLD MEETING HOUSE.

The Second Meeting House

The second meeting house was built in 1767, but not without some controversy. In 1761, the town agreed that a new meeting house should be built, but disagreements arose as to its best location. A committee of people from neighboring towns was called upon to decide the question, and after suitable consideration, they recommended that it should be in the middle of Main Street, just north of the first meeting house. But some townspeople remained dissatisfied with this decision, and in May 1763, a town meeting voted (by a large majority) to build it to the west of Main Street, very near its present location. The town also decided that the new meeting house should have a steeple, and a few months later, a bell. These refinements added to the expense of the building, and although stone foundations were laid and the basic structure was enclosed by May of 1764, the new church was only finished in 1767. It was 55 by 44 feet, with a steeple at the north end. Inside, the pulpit was at the west end with galleries on three sides, and the pews were enclosed in panels. A special committee met every few years to assign the pews to

particular families based on their social standing. In the 1770s, the church engaged Seth Hastings from Warwick “to teach the art of singing” and the church had a choir of 25 voices.

The outside of the church remained unpainted until 1789, after many farmers had taken extra care with their flax fields the previous year. The crop was purchased by the town and exchanged for linseed oil and “dry red”, which was used to paint the church red (!) in the summer of 1789. This new color was quite popular and started a new fashion for some houses and other town buildings, including the school.

When Rev. John Hubbard died in 1794, he had ministered to First Parish for forty-four years. He had arrived as a young bachelor fresh out of Yale. He always offered up prayers for the king of England, and during the early years of the American Revolution, the local Committee of Safety determined to stop this habit. Deacon Samuel Smith stood up in the Sabbath service and forbade the pastor from offering prayer. Hubbard declined to submit to this limitation on his rights, and harsh words were exchanged for the next two years. The Committee had the support of the majority of town voters, but Hubbard had the majority of the church. Finally, while a council of churches was meeting to arbitrate this impasse, the Committee drew up a paper to reconcile their differences. In it they asked Hubbard to “pray for the prosperity of the American arms...” and to “forgive every matter of real or supposed offence....” They in turn “acknowledge that many things grievous to our pastor may have taken place...” and go on to state their willingness “to receive and acknowledge ye Rev. Mr. Hubbard as our sincerely respected and dearly beloved Pastor...” and “more cordially to unite with him in the sacred bonds of the Gospel of peace.” The remaining 15 years of Hubbard’s tenure was uneventful, even though at times the town was as much as five years behind on his salary.

The installation of the next minister, Rev. Samuel Clesson Allen, recent graduate of Dartmouth College, was made into a grand event in October, 1794. The church booked 50 rooms at the tavern for visiting guests – including the president of Dartmouth and some of the faculty and student body. A grand ceremony was held with the now proficient choir leading the way, and a preacher brought in from Westmoreland, NH. After a brief tenure Rev. Allen turned to the study of law, and remained in town to practice.

By 1798, the origin bell no longer sounded clear and loud. Mr. Benjamin Callendar Jr., a member of a new family in town and an engraver with ties to Paul Revere of Boston, was

charged by the town with ordering a new church bell from him. Just under \$120 dollars was raised for the bell: forty-one dollars and 6 cents was paid to Mr. Revere, and the rest was spent on transporting the bell from Boston and paying the ropemaker, blacksmith and various townspeople for “bands, gudgeons, bolts, nuts, staples screws, strap for the pulley block and lumber for the yoke,” and additional lumber and work in order to get the 944 pound bell in place in the belfry.

Becoming a Unitarian Church

The new Revere bell was soon ringing over the ordination of a new minister, Rev. Thomas Mason in 1799. He was single, thirty, a recent graduate of Harvard (where he was the wrestling champion), and of course cultured, eloquent and strong-minded. Despite the hopes that he might marry someone in town, he married a woman from Sterling, Lydia Kendall. When she died shortly after giving birth to their second child, Mason soon remarried in 1803, this time to Sophia Barnard, another woman from the same town. A year after Rev. Mason took up the pulpit, a former Northfield resident, Capt. Samuel Smith, donated an organ to the church.

It was Rev. Mason who brought the new Unitarian movement from Harvard to Northfield. These liberal ideas challenged the orthodox ideas of the Congregational Church which had been the affiliation of the church from its beginning. In addition to his advocacy of Unitarianism, Rev. Mason had other strengths and weaknesses. He was known to join others at the local tavern. When Guy, a slave of Deacon Dutton died, Rev. Mason “made a memorable prayer of the most touching humanism, long to be remembered.” But Rev. Mason did not take criticism well, and sometimes buried a barb in his sermons. In 1825, the orthodox minority withdrew and formed the Second Congregational Society. A further fission occurred in 1827 when a splinter group of Unitarians broke off from Mason’s church, and hired another minister, Reverend Samuel Presbury, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, the next year. After Rev. Presbury retired in 1829 and Rev. Mason was dismissed from the pulpit in 1830, their respective followers reconciled under Rev. George Hosmer, minister of First Parish Church from 1830 to 1836.

Reunited in the Third Building

In 1832, William Pomeroy, a local merchant and distiller from a family with long ties to the town, offered to pay for the removal of the old church and its replacement with a new one on an adjacent site. The offer was quickly accepted and the new church building (the third meeting house) was dedicated in October, 1833. The new church was very modern with heating -- a recent innovation, high gothic windows, a spire in the style of Wren, and Paul Revere's bell hung in the open belfry. The organ donated by Capt. Smith was repaired and improved. Mr. Pomeroy soon established a substantial trust fund to maintain a minister for the church, provided that his theology be in accord with those taught at "the Theological College in Cambridge", thus ensuring that First Parish would now remain Unitarian.



First Parish Church. Dedicated in 1833. Burned on December 25, 1870
Built west of the site of first Northfield church building of 1767
Site of present Unitarian Church

Among the families that attended First Parish in this time period were the parents of Dwight L. Moody, later a prominent evangelist and a major force in Northfield's history. In 1841, when Dwight was four years old, his father Edwin Moody died, leaving his mother Betsey with a mortgage-burdened farm and nine children to raise alone. The pastor of First Parish, Rev. Oliver C. Everett, provided support for the family, and Betsey and her children were baptized into the Unitarian Church. When Rev. Everett left to accept a position in Charlestown in 1848, the Moody family soon departed First Parish as well. When Betsey Moody died many years later her famous son said, "Mr. Everett, the pastor of the Unitarian church, I remember how kind he was in those days. I want to testify how much my mother appreciated that." Rev. O.C. Everett was one of 173 Unitarian ministers who signed "A Protest Against American Slavery" in 1845. In Massachusetts, some of the most famous abolitionists were Unitarians like Rev. Theodore Parker, and Rev. William Lloyd Garrison.

Following the departure of Rev. Everett, First Parish had a series of ministers with brief tenures, and then Rev. Charles Noyes was installed in October, 1865. He worked to ensure that the horse sheds and the vestry were repaired, and the latter redecorated at considerable expense. Noyes preached in New Orleans for four months in 1869. On his return, he found that the church roof had been "slated, the walls frescoed, and the outside of the church painted." Attendance had increased, and donations and fundraising by the Ladies Sewing Circle soon paid for the repairs. But a tragic accident occurred in June, when the train Rev. Noyes was riding back from Boston fell through a bridge, to the river below. Although others seated near him died, he survived to make a slow recovery over the next few months.

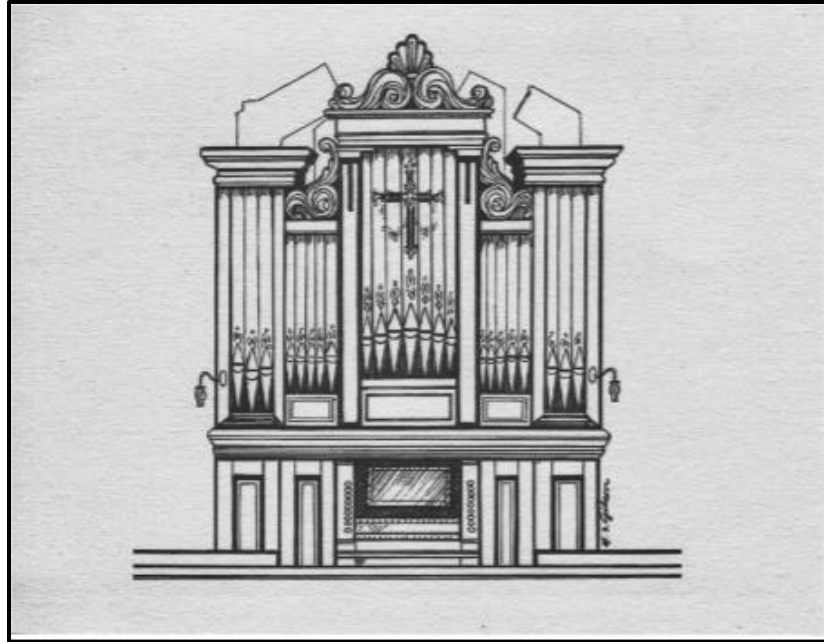
On Christmas Sunday 1871, First Parish Church had celebrated the holiday in the usual way. But that night between 11 pm and midnight, "fire was discovered issuing from the roof and belfry." "Within two or three hours, the entire edifice was a mass of ashes and smoking embers. The chimney overheated, ignited woodwork but fortunately there was no wind and the adjacent buildings and sheds were saved." The fire was caused by a defective furnace flue. At the time, the town was ill-prepared to save the building, and it burned to the ground. The Paul Revere bell, which had been transferred from the older building to this one, was melted by the fire into a large, useless lump. The very next day after the fire, fundraising began for a new church building and \$3100 was pledged immediately. The building had been insured for \$4000, and the

remaining funds necessary for rebuilding were soon raised. Mr. J.W. Allen of New York gave the church a new bell and paid for its delivery. The town raised funds for a Town Clock, which was placed on the new steeple. Visible from all over Northfield, the clock was made by the E. Howard Co of Boston, the premier clock maker in New England at the time. Several friends of the church provided a new pulpit.

The Current Church Building

The present church was dedicated February 15, 1872, less than fourteen months after the fire. It stands on approximately the same site as its two predecessors. Its ornate Gothic-style design was the work of Elbridge Boyden (Boyden and Son, Architects, James L. Dean Builder) from Worcester. Its style stands out in a town center that otherwise consists primarily of early 19th century Federal and Greek Revival-style homes. It was built at a cost of nearly \$15,000 (a little over \$300,000 today).

Part of the new furnishings of the church was a “new” organ. It was once thought to be “the oldest unaltered two-manual organ in the nation,” but apparently is only the second oldest. It was built by E. & G.G. Hook of Boston, Massachusetts as their Opus 48 and completed in 1842 for the Third Congregational Society (Unitarian) of Springfield, Massachusetts. Following the 1871 fire, the Springfield congregation donated their by then out-of-service Op. 48 to the Northfield rebuilding project. The Springfield congregation had been growing and were then in the process of obtaining a much larger Hook Op. 449 for their new building. In receipt of this gift, the Northfield Unitarians installed it in the new church’s gallery at the back of the sanctuary. Rev. Noyes, having delayed his resignation to oversee the rebuilding of the church, preached his last sermon at the end of June 1872.





Rev. Sunderland and Rev. Moody

The first minister in the present church was Rev. Jabez T. Sunderland (1872-1876). He had originally been trained as a Baptist and converted to Unitarianism while working in Chicago. Rev. Sunderland was accompanied by his wife, Eliza Jane Read Sunderland. She became a co-leader of the church, and occasionally preached instead of her husband, and some said she was the better preacher. In 1876, resolutions were passed extending to parish women the right to vote on parish matters. First Parish was well-attended, and had an excellent choir. The Sunday School flourished, and a young peoples' Christian Union was founded which had many social activities, and also worked for street lighting in town.

Later, in 1875 when Rev. Dwight L. Moody returned to Northfield as a famous evangelist, he declined an invitation to preach at First Parish from the Rev. Jabez T. Sunderland the pastor at the time, even though the two men had worked together in Chicago. Newspapers of the time called Northfield a stronghold of Unitarianism, and Rev. Moody made clear that there were doctrinal differences between his views and those of First Parish. Rev. Sunderland took up the challenge and laid out the Unitarian point of view in a sermon emphasizing the faith that "revered God without defying the exercise of His gift of reason." Rev. Sunderland soon moved on to the pulpit of a Unitarian church in Chicago, to be replaced by a series of ministers with relatively short tenures.

One important member of the church in this era was the long-time organist Miss Maria Field. She was a driving musical force in church and town for many years. In spring and summer of 1879 she marshalled every trained voice in town in rehearsals of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera "H.M.S. Pinafore." She directed and accompanied the show on the piano. She resigned as organist in 1894, and was replaced by Mrs. Charles H. Webster who resigned in 1940, having installed an electric blower on the organ.

Over time the disputes lost some of their bite, with one speaker at a Moody conference in 1907 praising much of the Unitarian view of Christ's humanity. As noted, when Betsey Moody died her famous son had praised Rev. Everett's earlier kindness to the family. On the last Sunday of 1908, the Rev. Paul Dwight Moody (son of the evangelist) preached in the First Parish Unitarian Church, marking the 66th anniversary of Betsey Holton Moody (Rev. D.L. Moody's

mother) joining First Parish. The son graciously made up for his father's snub of an invitation over thirty years earlier. Rev. Daniel M. Wilson (1904-1909) was the Unitarian minister at the time.

In 1892, a new Parish Committee was formed with three men and three women to direct the work of the church. The Ladies' Society obtained their permission to move the organ from the gallery to the rear of the pulpit. In 1902 the parish voted "to build nineteen horse sheds to replace the ones destroyed last July 4." Further changes involved moving the furnace, and placing the kitchen to the west of it. Between 1892 and 1903, Rev. George F. Piper had performed 38 weddings and attended 154 funerals. In 1910, the church held a celebration at Town Hall for Charles W. Mattoon for his forty years of service as floral minister – bringing flowers faithfully to decorate the pulpit and platform for services for all that time. September 1, 1918 the church and town celebrated the bicentennial of Northfield First Parish Church with a sermon attended by 200 people, and an afternoon service at the Stone, marking the site of the Oak Tree where Northfield's very first church service took place.



Interior -- First Parish Church in the 1930s?

Key Challenges of the Twentieth Century and Recent Decades

Charles C. and Mary Andrews Conner began their pastorate January 1, 1930. Of course, this was not an auspicious moment in the nation's history as the Stock Market Crash of 1929 was only a few months past, and the Great Depression was coming. Despite all that, the interior of the church was renovated and the parsonage too. Mr. Conner withdrew from his pastoral duties to devote his time to literary efforts, and Mrs. Conner took charge from 1932. She not only led services, but helped to establish evening events for young people between 15 and 25, with games and dances -- first at church, and then later at Alexander Hall, with help from townspeople and some of the Youth Hostel group. Attendance started at 35 and soon grew to an average of 75.



Christmas pageant 1931 or 1932

On Sept. 21, 1938, amid pouring rain, which had already continued for three days, "Mrs. Conner went into the church to work. The wind began to blow so violently that the big front window was watched for it showed signs of falling in. The wind became so furious, that she was urged to leave the church, just four minutes before the church chimney crashed through the roof to the main floor breaking pews and floor to the basement. Within one hour the hurricane had

done its devastating work in Northfield, laying low 147 beautiful old elm and maple trees on our lovely main street and 404 trees in all other parts of town. Northfield streets were impassable and our town looked wrecked the morning after.” With help from the American Unitarian Association and others, First Parish members set to work raising funds to restore the building once again.



Destruction caused by the Hurricane of September 21, 1938.

Note hole in roof in the upper picture.

Photographs given by Mr and Mrs Thomas Parker. From the archives of First Parish of Northfield, Unitarian.



Mr. George N. Kidder directed the restoration efforts, supervising, laboring and donating to the effort. “In brief, that terrible hurricane proved to be a blessing to our church. Out of its havoc was born a new spirit among our people.” When she resigned Sept. 1, 1940, Mrs. Conner summed up her decade leading the church: “And thus this chapter of good will, dreams realized and dreams shattered, the ideal always leading, hard work, cooperation, disappointments and fulfillments, together we, people and minister, have weathered ten years of national and international depression, and have come through with all our bills paid, and the Spirit in the lead.”

In 1941, unsuspected hurricane damage caused sudden structural weakening of the building, and expensive repairs had to be made. Many townspeople outside the church contributed to help meet these expenses. By 1954, the church resisted a move to join with the Trinitarian Church. Instead, First Parish decided to share a new minister, Rev. Robert C. Slater (1954-1957) with the Unitarian Church in Bernardston. Rev. Slater was the twenty-eighth minister of the Northfield church. The building had shown no signs of serious deterioration, until 1955 when extensive decay was discovered in the steeple. Repairs were made in the summer of 1956, with the town paying part of the expenses. Rev. Slater left Northfield to take up a new assignment at a Unitarian Church in Pittsburgh, PA.

After some 70 years of debate, the broader Unitarian movement merged with the Universalists in 1960. First Parish had long favored this proposal, and has participated in the Unitarian Universalist Association since 1961.

Ministers of First Parish Church, Unitarian from 1923 to the present include: Roy E. Griffith, 1923-30; Charles C. Conner and Mary Andrews Conner 1930-1932; Mary Andrews Conner, 1932-40; Raymond Palmer 1940-41, Arthur Heeb, 1941-45; Hazel Rogers Gredler, 1945-48; Richard G. Sechrist, 1948-53; Robert S. Slater, 1954-57; Charles D. Moore, 1957-59; John Paul Jones, 1960-63; Frank A. Wahlstrom, 1963-68; Louis W. Foxwell, 1968-70; Daniel Weck, 1970-74; Rev. Violet Kochendoerfer, 1979-81; Rev. Paul Luther and Rev. James Craig (joint ministers ca 1987); Rev. David Farrington, 2001-03; Rev. Steve Wilson 2003-06; Rev. Marguerite Sheehan, 2007-08; Rev. Cynthia A. Frado, 2013-16; Rev. Melissa Carvill Ziemer, 2018—present. In some of the intervals, First Parish has been led by dedicated parishioners who

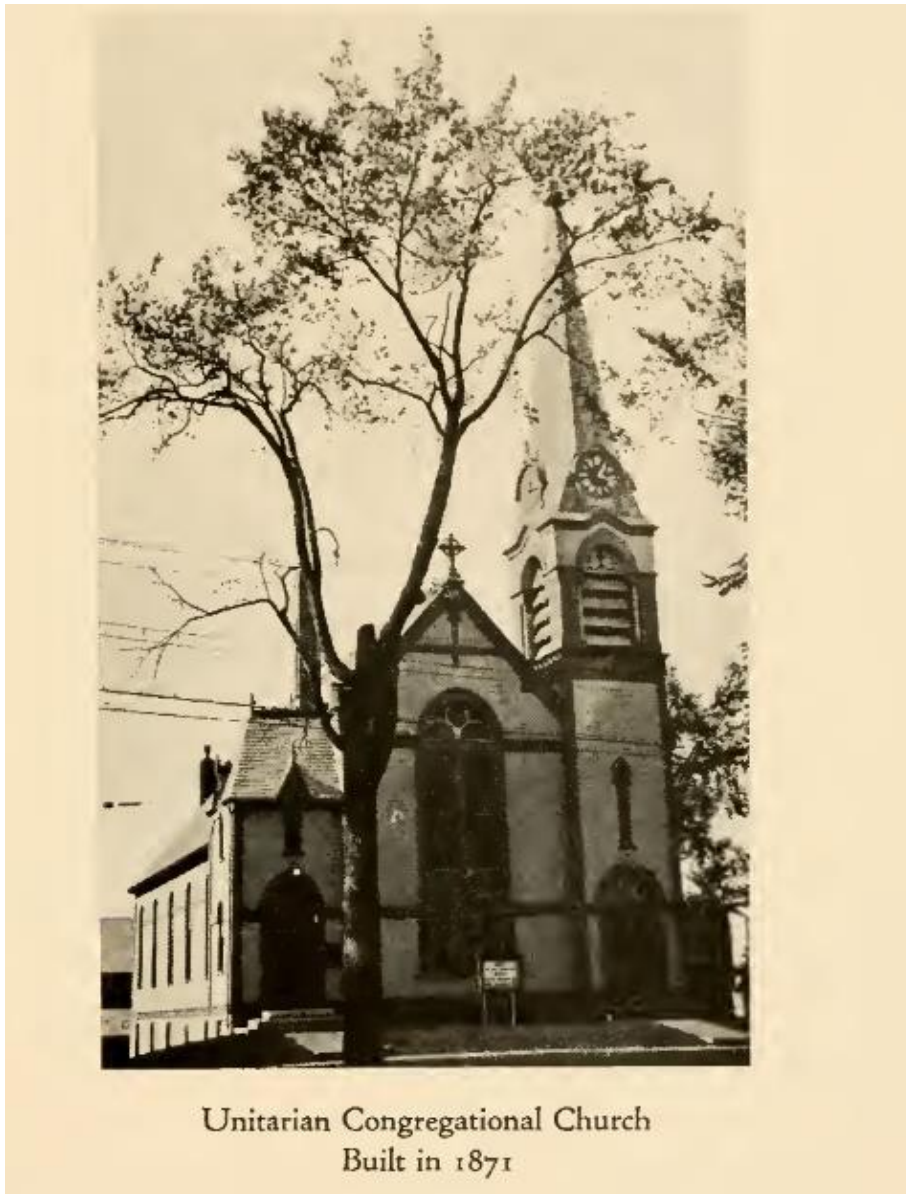
kept the spirit of the church alive amid many difficulties. The church has also had many visiting speakers to fill the pulpit.

In the twentieth-first century, First Parish has continued to play an important role in Northfield. There was a long tradition of community breakfasts, and an annual Thanksgiving dinner open to all. More recently, the church has supported the Northfield Food Bank, and joined with other churches and community groups taking a turn hosting the monthly Northfield Community Meals. The Church has organized the annual October Monster Dash 5k run, with breakfast for all the participants. Internally, First Parish revised its by-laws in 2019 to eliminate the longstanding tensions between the Parish Committee and the Board of Trustees.

First Parish has also welcomed people of the region to use our facilities, including Pilates and Yoga classes, and two different AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings. From time to time there have been concerts to raise funds to repair and make use of our 1842 organ; to honor the Northfield roots of the composer Calvin Swan; or to celebrate Northfield's December Holiday event. We have also had fundraisers for various good causes, including support for the people of Puerto Rico after a devastating hurricane, and for a local family who lost a young parent. We have hosted local ecumenical services, and walkers from the Leverett Peace Pagoda who were raising awareness of the long mistreatment of indigenous people in Massachusetts. We also tolled our bell for the many who had lost their lives to COVID-19 by January 2021. From the beginning of the Covid epidemic in 2020, First Parish worked to keep its community together by making use of hybrid services (both in-person and on-line via Zoom and other technologies), upgrading the ventilation of our sanctuary, and taking other recommended safety measures.



Reading the long history of First Parish of Northfield Unitarian, one is struck by the enduring traditions of actively participating in town affairs, working to maintain the physical building, caring for Church members and neighbors through all of life's stages, and engaging deeply with the moral and ethical issues of the day.



Unitarian Congregational Church
Built in 1871

Our Mission

The mission of First Parish of Northfield Unitarian is to embrace the spiritual through imaginative contemplation and reflection; to nurture fellowship, service and charity; and to share,

celebrate and affirm diversity and explore common needs among members, friends and the larger community.

Growing out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we also seek inspiration from great philosophers and world religions. We cherish diversity among our members, and require adherence to no creed.

As members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we accept the following seven principles agreed to by its member churches:

- Every person is a person of inherent worth and dignity.
- Human relations should be based on justice, equity, and compassion.
- Spiritual growth should be encouraged in our congregation but we should accept one another without regard to judgments about our spiritual growth.
- The search for truth and meaning should be free and responsible.
- Within our congregation and society at large the rights of conscience should be respected and a democratic process followed.
- We should work for the goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.
- We should respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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