

The Church Today

The liberal religion which planted a church in Burlington back in the days before Iowa became a state still survives in five churches scattered from the Mississippi to the Missouri. The early churches at Burlington, Keokuk, and Humboldt have disappeared. Besides a Fellowship unit at Ames, the surviving churches and their ministers are at Davenport, Max Gaebler, minister; Des Moines, Charles W. Phillips, minister; Cedar Rapids, Waldemar Argow, minister; Iowa City, Evans A. Worthley, minister; and Sioux City, John W. Brigham, minister.

Two of these churches (Iowa City and Cedar Rapids) are former Universalist churches, from an equally liberal tradition. This union in a way previews an attempted merger between these two liberal church bodies which is still being discussed at the present time.

As was suggested before, Unitarian churches have survived chiefly in the larger cities. Making as they do an intellectual rather than an emotional appeal to their members, they do not easily survive in rural areas where the scattered population makes it more difficult for people with similar interests to get together.

Of the 351 Unitarian churches which are active in the United States, the majority or better than two-thirds are still in New England or the Middle Atlantic states. Sixty-two churches are included in the Western Regional area which includes Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, part of Ohio, and Wisconsin. Only half that number (31) are out in the Pacific Coast area. The preponderance is still in the East, the original home of the founders like William Ellery Channing, Jared Sparks, Samuel A. Eliot, James Freeman, and Leverett Saltonstall, all of whom were present at the meeting held in the vestry of the Federal Street church, on January 27, 1825, when the American Unitarian Association was founded.

According to the 1948-49 Year Book of the American Unitarian Association, there is an estimated membership of 74,441 in these 351 active churches. This is not an impressive figure by contrast with that of other religions in this country, which makes the scope of the Unitarian relief program all the more impressive. Besides the United Unitarian Appeal which is a denominational fund-raising agency comparable to the Community Chests with which we are locally familiar, there is a Unitarian Service Committee with a staff both in this country and abroad. Its purpose, in part, is "To revive human initiative,

knowledge and skill and thus help people to help themselves."

One unique feature of the Unitarian Service Committee is the arranging of Medical Missions to be sent abroad. These Missions are composed of groups of doctors from this country who travel as a unit to acquaint foreign doctors with the scientific developments made in medicine during World War II when there was no interchange of knowledge. The Service Committee also manages the distribution of food and clothing in the stricken areas of Europe and Asia. In 1948 the Iowa City church was sixth in the total 351 churches in the amount of clothing sent abroad, which gives some idea of what a little church of ninety members can do.

Thus briefly we have set down the record of one liberal faith in Iowa, the role it played in the cultural development of the state, and the subsequent history of the Unitarian Church.