

In the 1800s, the church moved beyond Calvinism, which reserved salvation for an elect few. But wealthy white men still controlled access to earthly kingdoms. They made sure doors remained shut to those considered of lesser value: women, slaves, immigrants, people without money or property. Over the years people at this church have tried to push the doors open so more people could achieve respect and self-determination.

A theological door opened when we called our first Unitarian minister in 1829: Rev. Frederick Hedge. He became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson and helped form the Cambridge Anti-Slavery Association. Many Unitarians and Universalists supported the radical idea that slaves were people, and that nobody should own another person. But most people thought slavery was part of God's plan. And all women, as descendants of Eve, made from Adam's rib, were supposed to be subservient to men.

When the church hired a Unitarian, some members left. They wanted to worship the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – whereas Unitarians believed God was a single entity, and that people hold the keys to their own salvation. Your fate was not decided before you were born, as in Calvinism; the way you lived determined whether you went to hell or entered the kingdom of heaven. They still firmly believed in heaven and hell.

All over New England, when churches called Unitarian ministers, the orthodox folks – the ones who wanted things to stay the same – often went off and formed their own congregation, leaving behind the building, the communion silver, and other valuables. The ones who left complained, “They kept the silver, but we kept the faith.”

Those who left our church formed the Pleasant Street Congregational Church. It disbanded a few years ago and has reopened as the Boston Church of Christ. The original name of our church in 1733 was the Second Church of Christ in Cambridge, as we were part of Cambridge then. In 1807, when we became our own town called West Cambridge, the church became First Parish in West Cambridge.

An attempt to open another door failed in 1833. Some members declared the church Universalist at a Parish Committee meeting, but at the next meeting it was voted down. Many were not ready to give up heaven and hell. I have run into folks who, when told that Universalism means that everyone achieves salvation, say with a worried look, “But what about bad people? How can they not be punished?” It goes against our basic thirst for fairness – we feel in our bones that evildoers should not pass through the same doors as their innocent victims.

Once again part of the congregation left, and before long founded their own Universalist church in town.

In 1845 our minister, Rev. William Ware, joined a large group of Unitarian ministers in signing a statement condemning slavery.

Ware left that year, and the search for his replacement took three years. Two candidates decided not to take the offer. There was an interesting interim for three months: Samuel Longfellow, brother of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the most popular American poet of the 19th century. We asked Samuel to stay, but he declined.

In 1849, the year Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery, the church's female members founded the Social Circle, which 44 years later would become the Women's Alliance. In 1854 we called Rev. Samuel Abbot Smith. He and his wife, Maria, turned outward in a big way. They considered themselves "ministers at large" for the poor of the town. They helped people without regard to color, faith, or creed. Just a year and a half into Rev. Smith's ministry, on New Year's Day in 1855, his 15-year-old meetinghouse burned down.

The congregation wasted no time rebuilding, raising a huge Victorian pile full of dark, carved wood. Its steeple was the second tallest in New England. Its weathervane hangs in our entryway, next to a painting of the church.

Town Meeting voted to pay for a steeple clock with four faces, as long as the parish kept it in good repair. The pendulum was 12 feet long, with a football-sized bob on the end. The steeple held a bell — that one back there — cast by the Hooper Foundry of Canton the successor to Paul Revere's bell factory. A thick rope lifted children into the air when they were allowed to pull on it to toll the bell.

When the Civil War began in 1861, the Social Circle joined other West Cambridge women to form the Ladies' Soldiers' Aid Society. This turning outward meant knitting countless pairs of socks and sending supplies to Union troops.

In 1865, the last year of the war, Rev. Smith traveled to Virginia as part of the American Unitarian Association's relief work in the South. Ministers served as hospital chaplains and teachers educating freed slaves. But disease was the number-one killer during the war, and Samuel caught typhoid fever.

Gravely ill, he journeyed home. His wife was about to have their fourth child. Their son Abbot was 10; Maria, named for her mother, was 8; another son, George, was 4. On April 5, Maria gave birth to a boy they named Samuel, after his father. Not quite two months later, Rev. Smith died. He was 36. His widow was 34.

On an early summer day, much like this one, Maria and her four children, one a babe in arms, stood by a freshly dug grave in our Old Burying Ground, listening to words of

comfort about the life of the world to come. Rev. Smith was one of the last people to be buried in our graveyard.

The war ended official slavery, and for a couple of decades newly freed people formed families and communities, founded their own churches, voted, acquired land, and even held elected office. But when a terrible economic recession struck, Jim Crow laws pushed them into many forms of virtual slavery.

Two years after the end of the war, in 1866, Rev. Charles Salter decided to stop holding an afternoon service as well as a morning one. Attendance was waning. And apparently those who did attend were unruly – a female parishioner wrote in her diary that Mr. Salter once paused in the middle of a sermon and said, “I will wait until I can have the attention of the congregation.”

The next year, 1867, the town changed its name to Arlington. It was graceful and patriotic – Arlington National Cemetery had recently opened – and gave us our own identity. In 1875 our minister, Rev. George Cutter, arranged a lecture series of local ministers. When it was his turn to speak, his topic was “Our Duty to Criminals” – an interesting echo of our current focus on prison reform.

In the parish records Rev. Cutter observed, “I have never been recognized as a Christian clergyman by the Evangelical churches in Arlington.” We are now surrounded by evangelical churches – High Rock and the Boston Church of Christ. Their ministers probably don’t consider our minister a Christian, and she’s certainly not a clergyman! Industry took off after the war, but Arlington remained filled with prosperous farms.

In 1878 we hired Rev. William Parrot. His name is spelled like the bird, parrot, but pronounced à la Francaise, for he immigrated from France to New Orleans in the 1860s. There he married a Creole lady, a woman of mixed race. She died in childbirth, supposedly because a priest insisted that the child’s life be saved at all costs. The baby also died, and Parrot blamed the Catholic church. He moved to Michigan, where in 1867 he was ordained a Unitarian minister.

Rev. Parrot married again, to Georgette Josephine Grubb, with two Bs. She was from a well-off Philadelphia family who were not thrilled with her choice, a foreign-born, ex-Catholic, liberal, Unitarian minister. William and Georgette ignored them and proceeded to have nine children.

Rev. Parrot was interested in the natural sciences, in fresh ideas and discoveries, but the congregation was conservative. Factions developed as soon as he arrived.

In its first century or two, the congregation was mostly farmers with little education. They deferred to the minister, with his college degrees and lofty social position. But by the mid-1800s many First Parishioners were businessmen, politicians, lawyers. They had a high opinion of their opinions and expected to get their way. They included:

Addison Gage, owner of the largest ice company in the country, shipping frozen water cut from Spy Pond around the globe.

State Senator Joseph Potter.

A future governor, John Quincy Adams Brackett.

Judge William Parmenter, who moderated parish meetings and helped develop the town's public schools.

A secret ballot taken in 1881 showed the congregation split down the middle. Parrot resigned. Soon after the parish voted to sell the parsonage, because it was too far from the church. At this, nine members left and the entire Parish Committee wanted to resign, but the congregation insisted they serve out their terms.

Contention like this was not new to the church, but this moment shows how members were pulling away from the rest of the town in education and social class. Doors were opening for those with resources; they remained firmly shut for those with less.

The Parrots stayed in Arlington four more years, then moved to Maine. Their five sons went to Exeter and became businessmen and lawyers – except for the one who became a sheep rancher in Australia. One of their four daughters, Grace, died of diphtheria as a child and is buried in our graveyard.

In 1882 the parish welcomed Rev. John Perkins Forbes. According to the Advocate, the congregation called him “with remarkable unanimity,” a phrase that shows the town's newspaper was well acquainted with the frequent turmoil under our spire. Unity must have been a relief to everyone.

The next year the church finally settled a long dispute about a fund that had been set up to build a fence around the church. ParCom admitted it could not untangle what funds, if any, were being withheld. The clerk recorded:

“On Mr. H. H. Homer's motion the report was laid on the table. It is to be hoped it will lay there forever, and cumber up no more pages of the record book.”

Under Rev. Forbes we finally declared that there was no difference between church members and parish members, as was still expressed in the church covenant. This dated back to the time when only the elect – only those sure they were among the saved – were church members, and only they could take communion. In the 1880s First Parish stated

that communion was open to “everyone without reservation,” and the congregation took it from a shining silver service every Sunday.

After this healing ministry, the church called Rev. Augustus Mendon Lord, whose sense of humor helped further defuse tensions. He liked to refer to himself as “The Lord,” with a twinkle in his eye. Before he spoke he would sometimes intone, “Thus saith the Lord.”

In 1893 the Social Circle became the Women’s Alliance, reflecting a desire to turn outward. A framed letter on the wall of our church library shows one example: In 1894 Booker T. Washington thanked the Alliance for a donation that helped educate the children of former slaves.

The president of the Social Circle was Ida Robbins. Ida and her sisters, Eliza and Caira, were part of Arlington’s richest family. They lived in a grand house on Mass. Ave.

The Robbins girls and their brother, Olney, came to live with their grandparents after their father died, and inherited the house in 1888. Two years later they moved it back from Mass. Ave. to make room for the library they donated to the town. They also gave money to build Town Hall, dedicated in 1913 along with the garden built around Cyrus Dallin’s statue of the Menotomy hunter.

The Robbins sisters were rich and cultured. They would have been fabulous catches, but not one of them ever married.

Upon marriage a woman became the property of her husband. Her new status was reflected in her name, which disappeared into his. She was now “Mrs. William Whatever,” even her first name left behind. Assets she brought to her marriage, or earned during it, including wages, became her husband’s. He could manage them or give them away without consulting her. He was expected to rule over her and physically chastise her if he deemed it necessary. One can understand why Ida, Eliza, and Caira avoided this arrangement.

African American men had been guaranteed the right to vote in 1865, but the promise of the Fifteenth Amendment was muted by continuous, violent efforts to keep them out of the voting booth, which was not considered their place. It’s a long and depressing history that stretches down to today’s voter-suppression tactics.

The turn of the century brought many changes. First Parish was a conservative and comforting respite from the horrors of the outside world. During the first World War, we hosted “union” services where Unitarians, Universalists, and Congregationalists worshipped together to conserve coal for the war effort.

In 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment finally allowed women to vote. As that decade began Arlington still had many farms and greenhouses. My spouse owns a 1924 insurance atlas that shows some interesting things:

There were two high schools – one on Academy Street, and one in the current location. Behind it was Cutter’s Pond, a pretty big body of water. Much of the land around the pond was owned by the Frost Insecticide Company. Their factory was one lot away from the Buttrick Butter & Cream Company. On Gardner Street, in East Arlington, there’s a tiny lot labeled “Colored Cemetery.”

I would not have thought Arlington had enough people of color in the 20s to need a cemetery. I assumed the lot had been built over, but when I took a drive to East Arlington I was delighted to find a black metal fence enclosing a space with a large stone. The stone bears a masonic symbol and the words “Prince Hall Cemetery.”

This graveyard is the only remaining African American Masonic cemetery in the United States. It holds members of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge, founded by Mr. Hall in 1776, a date that resonates with liberty. In 1868 Grand Master William Kendall deeded the site to his lodge, and black masons were buried there until about 1897.

Prince Hall was a free man who lived in Boston from about 1738 to 1807. He was literate and owned his own leather shop. He was a homeowner who paid taxes. He and 14 other free men of color applied to join the Boston Masonic lodge, drawn by its ideals of liberty, equality, and peace. When they were rejected, they joined the Grand Lodge of Ireland, then founded African Lodge No. 1. Hall was named Grand Master, which must have resonated with him as he agitated against slavery all his life.

Our little cemetery was nearly lost, but in 1990 the Masons, the town, and the Arlington Historical Society renovated the site and placed the marker. Each Memorial Day people gather to honor those buried there – I saw in the Advocate that they did it last May.

The house I live in was built in 1926, when developers were laying out streets on farmland. The insurance atlas has promotions for developments. A note in the corner of one assures the reader that the area is “Fully Restricted Against Undesirable Encroachments.” That means anyone not white, and anyone not Christian. It also means anyone Irish. Arlington’s long history as a “dry” town can at least partly be traced to a desire to keep those undesirable immigrants in their place.

During the Great Depression in the 30s, bank failures and job losses no doubt caused many to turn to the town’s churches for comfort and help.

Massachusetts lost 10,000 soldiers in the Second World War, and Arlington gave her share.

Postwar prosperity meant more and more of the town's farmland was covered in houses. There was some business, especially car dealers, but mostly the town housed people who commuted to Boston. First Parish was a small, stable place.

In 1961 the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America united to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. Our church and the Universalists down the road, in the building that is now High Rock, began thinking about merging.

In 1963 the Universalists called Rev. Guy Meyer. To the dismay of his conservative congregation, Meyer preached on racial justice, civil rights, the Vietnam War. In 1964 they voted to fire him while he was in San Francisco at General Assembly!

Soon after, talks began about uniting, and the two churches came together 125 years after separating over doctrine. In 1965 we became First Parish Unitarian Universalist of Arlington. The Universalists left their building and joined us in the fourth meetinghouse. The Civil Rights movement drew many UUs to march and agitate. In 1965, UU minister James Reeb was killed while supporting the struggle for voting rights in Selma, Alabama. Charles Grady became our minister in 1969. He used his fine former-radio-announcer voice to preach from the pulpit of the ornate fourth meetinghouse. The choir loft was behind the pulpit. Rev. Grady's wife, Claudine, sang in the choir despite being blind. Gwen Hooper remembers one service when Charles spoke of raking leaves and admiring the bright blue sky. Claudine's voice could be heard saying to her loft-mate, "As if he would ever rake the leaves!" Laughter rang through the sanctuary, Charles joining in.

Gwen Hooper joined the church that same year, 1969, with her husband and children. She ran a nursery school at the church.

Child care was a new and controversial idea, serving the needs of the growing number of women working outside the home. The congregation numbered 60 or so on Sundays, with 8 or 10 in the choir. Gwen recalls that the service was "not that Christian," and that men held all the leadership roles.

In the early 70s Cynthia Tobey became chair of the Parish Committee, a major role for a woman. Her skillful leadership is acknowledged in our Tobey Lounge, named for her. Various fundraisers were part of the church year.

The women held a Lobster Luncheon on a weekday, possible because most did not work outside the home. The men held a Roast Beef Dinner in which they proudly did all the cooking, letting the women know they were not to enter the kitchen. The annual church fair lasted for days and included several meals.

The ushers were all men, showing people to their seats, collecting the offering, and helping strays who had wandered into our church instead of the Baptist one up the street. Linda Lu joined with Gwen Hooper in a push to let women be ushers. Linda was married to Bill Schultz, a later president of the UUA.

The male ushers were stiffly opposed. Rev. Grady stepped in to support Gwen and Linda. The ushers relented, but the process involved a great deal of “mansplaining” as the men gave the women lessons in the fine points of ushering. They were each paired with a man to make sure they did everything right. Gradually the men backed off, and soon women were allowed to usher, all by themselves, one whole Sunday per month!

Gwen was at her post as director of the Arlington Children’s Center when fire broke out in 1975. She recalls that after the fire, all the churches in town offered us space for the two preschools that rented from First Parish – except the Catholic churches, who opposed child care as a danger to the traditional family. Mothers were supposed to stay home with young children.

The congregation gathered in the parsonage that night, and Charles and Claudine comforted the shocked group. The phone kept ringing as people from across the country called. Their number-one question was, “Is the big maple tree okay?” The maple was about 80 years old in 1975, which makes it about 120 today.

The radical design of our new building was controversial. The town hated it, and the Catholic churches led the opposition to building such an untraditional thing in the town center. Despite the turmoil, the fifth meetinghouse rose from the ashes. Some members left over the design, and you can find people in Arlington who hate our building. But it has served us well with its flexibility and accessibility, and serves us even better after our renovation.

In 1976 a Red Line extension was proposed, with a stop in Arlington center. But the working-class, mostly Catholic town fiercely opposed it, led by St. Agnes Church. In a 1977 referendum, residents voted nine to one against the extension.

There is irony in the fact that many opponents were of Irish or Italian descent – the very people considered undesirable in the 20s and 30s. Now they were the majority, and they did not want “undesirable” people from Boston to hop a train and land in their midst. These undesirables were, of course, African Americans, considered a danger to the small-town serenity Arlington cherished.

There was no question of turning outward. The town turned inward and raised the barricades. Residents argued that traffic would become terrible and housing prices would soar, but their real concerns were making sure “outsiders” stayed in their place.

Today traffic is terrible, and affordable housing hard to find. Despite concerted effort, our town has become more open to the wider world. We are a bit more diverse. And Arlington has a vibrant population of young professionals, of a different social class than most past residents. Our exploration of social class here at First Parish is very timely for our community. And the repeated defacement of our Black Lives Matter banner shows Arlington's insularity does not lie entirely in the past.

In the 1970s the church began to use inclusive language, opening a door to not refer to God as "he" and all people as "men." It seems usual to us now, but it was a bold move. And it does make a difference. When I visit other churches and hear noninclusive language, it jars my ear, and reminds me what an open atmosphere I enjoy at First Parish.

In 1978 we hired Ted May to be our organist, even though at the time we did not have a church, much less an organ. For his first three years he played an electronic keyboard for services in the Bailey Room, and had to wait two more years for a real organ. Ted served us for many years, collaborating with Music Director Ken Seitz to create decades of wonderful, original, inspiring music.

In the early 1980s John Harrison was the first person to be openly gay at our church. The second was Gwen Hooper's husband. Their children were teens, and Gwen recalls the great support she felt from the congregation. Roger Hooper had founded a men's group and been on the RE Committee, and he stayed at the church for a few years after their divorce. He joined the Arlington Street Church in Boston and is active there. He and Gwen remain friends.

This happened before the word "gay" was part of society. Some of Gwen's friends and acquaintances pulled away, uncertain of what to say or how to react. Rev. Grady, who met regularly with other ministers in town, asked Gwen if she would be willing to be a resource for women in other congregations who might be dealing with the same situation. She agreed and over the years met with several people to provide support. This minister's connection had fallen away, but Marta has revived it.

In 1991 Barbara Whittaker-Johns was the first woman called to our pulpit, and though her time with us ended in turmoil, she stepped through the open door to take her place in our long line of ministers.

Among the many accomplishments of Barbara's ministry was her leadership on LGBT issues. In 1995 she proposed, with the approval of the Parish Committee, that First Parish embark on the process established by the UUA to become a "Welcoming Congregation"—that is, a congregation explicitly dedicated to the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Our ministerial intern, and later assistant minister, Kathy Huff, took the lead in

working with dozens of parishioners to educate ourselves and the congregation as a whole, to make necessary changes in worship and governance structures, and to prove to the satisfaction of the UUA that First Parish deserved to be an official Welcoming Congregation, a status that we achieved in 1997. Among the still visible concrete evidence of this work is the Welcoming Congregation charter, hand-lettered in gorgeous calligraphy, hanging in the main entry.

In the midst of this work, we became involved on the leading edge of an issue that was only beginning to achieve recognition in our culture as a whole and even in the UUA—the unique concerns and needs of transgender people. In 1996, we sponsored a workshop on “Transgender Reality.” One speaker was a UU transgender divinity student, Laurie Auffant, who had at that point been rejected by numerous UU churches in her search for a ministerial internship placement. First Parish took the pioneering step of accepting Laurie’s application. During her internship year, 1997-98, we wrestled to understand the many facets of “transgender”—a term and a concept that most of us literally had never heard or considered just months before. It was a year rich with learning and with struggle at First Parish. A highlight early in that year was our participation in the Pride March carrying the red and white banner that now hangs in the vestry; our brand-new banner was almost certainly the only one from any church that year to include the word “transgender.”

We called Rev. Carlton Smith as assistant minister in 2002. He brought his perspective as both an African American and a gay man, and especially inspired the youth of our church.

After two years of John Marsh’s healing ministry, we were blessed with Rev. Marta Flanagan. She has flung our doors wide open, encouraging the community to step inside, and leading us outward to bring our ideals into a world that desperately needs them.

As we at First Parish keep trying to make the world a better place for those trapped behind the doors of racism, behind the doors of prisons, behind the doors of poverty, behind the doors of domestic violence, behind the doors of discrimination of all kinds, we see a world filled with obstacles to the inherent worth and dignity of each and every person.

But we remain committed to working on opening those doors and shining light into dark places. We have hope that someday all the doors will swing wide open, and everyone can come in and be welcome.