

HISTORY OF THE ALLEN AVENUE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

1821 - PRESENT



Allen Avenue UU Church has a long and complex history. In 1821, our church began as the **First Universalist Society of Portland**. These early forebears built a wooden church on the corner of Congress and Pearl Street in Portland. The Rev. Russell Streeter became the Society's first minister, a post he held on and off for years. The installation sermon was preached by the renowned Universalist preacher, Rev. Hosea Ballou, sometimes called the father of Universalism. The church was surmounted by the highest steeple in town, and the belfry contained a 1200 lb. bell which spread its message abroad, "No Hell, No Hell, No Hell."

In 1865, the congregation built a new and magnificent building through the efforts and financial support of a small group of influential men, including the governor of Maine. The construction was of English brick with a slate roof. It contained the largest organ in Maine and seated 1,100 people. They renamed their congregation **The First Universalist Church**. Because of its location at Congress and High Street, it was called the "Congress Square" church.

In addition to the Congress Square church, there was also the **India Street Universalist Society** and the **Church of the Messiah** serving the Munjoy Hill neighborhood.

In 1829, other Universalists founded the **First Universalist Society of Westbrook**. In 1867, they built the **New Universalist Church** on Stevens Avenue at the Westbrook Seminary (which became Westbrook Junior College), and now the former church is the University of New England's Ludcke Auditorium. As the neighborhood was incorporated into Portland, the church went through other name changes. In 1883 they became All Souls Church, and in 1927, **All Souls Universalist Church**.

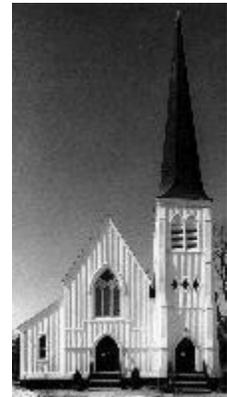


In 1943, the Church of the Messiah and All Souls Universalist Church merged. They renovated the building on Stevens Avenue and changed their name to **Messiah-All Souls Universalist Church**.

Meanwhile, in the years leading up to 1964, the First Universalist Church (Congress Square) experienced a declining membership and financial hardships. After careful deliberation, under the leadership of the Rev. Earl McKinney, they sold the Congress Square building, and merged with Messiah-All Souls.

They met for a while in the Stevens Avenue building, and the merged congregations renamed it the **Universalist Church of Portland**.

In 1969, The Rev. Robert Wolf became their minister and took on the responsibility of harmonizing a still-divided congregation and leading the work of developing a new church site. The move occurred in April 1970, three years short of their original goal. They bought land on Allen Avenue, and built our current church building, which was dedicated on April 21, 1971.





The 1962 merger between the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association resulted in change in our religious tradition. Under the leadership of the Rev. Wolf, the church began to expand its theological understandings as well as its membership. By 1980, the congregation identified itself firmly as Unitarian Universalist, and the name changed to **The Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church**, now nicknamed "A2U2." An inspirational Religious

Education Director, Tirrell Kimball, helped the Religious Education Program flourish, and many families found their way to the church. The Religious Education activities were often in the news, and the church became very active in issues of social justice. In 1986, the Rev. Robert Wolf, much loved by the members, left the church after seventeen years as its minister.

From 1987 to 1994, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Yondorf served as the minister. From 1995 to 2003, the Rev. Jean Wahlstrom served as the first female minister. In 2001, members learned of plans for condominiums to be built on land adjoining our building. Quick action on the part of the board resulted in the church purchasing the land, a beautiful wooded area featuring interesting rock outcroppings and assuring an area for future expansion.

At the 2003 General Assembly in Boston, the Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church received the prestigious James Bennett Award for Social Action. At the same time, Tirrell Kimball, Director of Religious Education, won the UU Angus H. MacLean Award for Excellence in Religious Education. That same day, our church was officially designated as a Green Sanctuary, which is earned through our commitment to living lightly on the Earth. Later in 2003 our member studied the issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity and became an official Welcoming Congregation.

The church building is used throughout the year by a pre-school, an outdoor club, and art class, several community choirs, and more. The beautiful flower gardens, lawn and grounds surrounding the church, and our Dawn Redwood tree, are favorites for various birds. Prominent on the lawn is a Peace Pole, chosen and cherished by the young people.

In August of 2005, after a purposeful congregational commitment to further membership growth, we called the Rev. Dr. Mykel Johnson as our new minister. As part of our commitment to growth, we doubled our Sunday morning service from one to two services, immediately resulting in increased attendance.

In May 2013, our church community committed to a three-year goal of bringing our building and grounds into closer alignment with our values, using permaculture as a design ethic. In the fall of 2015, we have completed a successful appeal for the funds to embark on several building and land improvements, designed for environmental sustainability into the future.

We enter the year 2016 with skilled leadership, and Rev. Myke continues to provide us with warm ministry and compelling Sunday sermons.

Prepared beginning 2005 and updated December 2015 by Sally Breen, Janet Stover, Terri Grover, Steve Macomber and Rev. Myke Johnson.