

Our Dawn Redwood Tree

A tall, beautiful dawn redwood tree grows in the center of our front garden. In 1971, shortly after construction was completed on our current building, the congregation planted a tiny seedling as a memorial to a former president of the congregation, Dr. Harry Lyons. The new building was sided with redwood and so they chose a dawn redwood seedling to symbolize rebirth and "giving back."

Cousin to the great redwoods and giant sequoias of the west coast, the dawn redwood was close to extinction when a forester with the Red Army noticed a grove of them near a remote Chinese village in 1941. A few years later specimens were collected and brought to Dr. Hu Hsen Hsu, a professor at the botanical institute in Beijing, who had read about redwood-like fossils found in North America and Asia and realized that his specimens were living examples of the same species. The dawn redwood became known as a living fossil.

Dr. Hu shared his discovery with botanists around the world. In 1948 the director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston acquired seeds and distributed them to institutions and arboretums around the United States. The trees thrived in North America.

Like the dawn redwood, our congregation also has a story of rebirth from near extinction. Planted here on Allen Avenue in 1971, A2U2 was formed from a merger of three Universalist congregations that had fallen on hard times. They joined together with a commitment to build a new church, and since then the church has grown and thrived, even as the tree has grown and thrived.

Dawn Redwoods are unusual in that they are deciduous conifers. Most conifers are evergreen, but the needle leaves of the dawn redwood turn a rusty orange color in the fall, and are shed in winter. Then, in the spring, all the needles are re-grown and beautifully green again. The growth of a congregation is like that too-- deciduous. There are the expansive seasons and the seasons of dormancy, where the growth is invisible, yet the roots and branches are building strength for the coming seasons. Our dawn redwood tree reminds that growth comes in cycles, that we must change and adapt as our size changes, and that we are always in relationship to the environment around us.

The trunk of the dawn redwood rises up straight and tall and reminds us that we need a strong center, a strong mission, to keep our community growing. The tree also has multiple branches that intertwine and stretch out in all directions. Likewise, our community must include many diverse people who can follow their own passion, while holding fast to the center. We don't know how tall the tree might eventually grow. It is not unusual for dawn redwoods to grow to 100 feet and ours is still quite young for a tree. It might yet outgrow the space in which it is planted. And we might too.