CUUC 20th Anniversary – homily – March 6, 2016 by Peter Scales

**Continuity and Change** [this is not a complete history of CUUC]

Chalice Lighter: Kathryn Poirier, whose birth in 1994 was part of the impetus for parents Michelle and Doug to join this congregation in 1999. Kathryn is one of the reasons that Capital was sustained!

Happy Birthday, Capital! Today we are 20 years old! Our congregation’s first service was 20 years ago. What has changed and what are we still doing the same? This is also a time to envision the future of our community.

There are archeological relics and oral traditions of First Nations people living here for at least 3000 years. In the early 1800s the largest Native settlement in what is now British Columbia was along the smooth beach at Cadboro Bay. When James Douglas steamed past this place in 1843 in the Hudson’s Bay Company ship *Cadboro*, the purple camas flowers reminded him of England. Douglas set up Fort Victoria near here because it was lovely. You might think that the foregoing does not have a lot to do with our congregation, but I want to honour the fact that local history did not start in 1843 or in 1996 but rather three thousand or more years ago.

When did the Unitarian presence begin in Victoria? A visiting minister conducted Unitarian services in Victoria’s city hall in 1871 but did not stay to build a congregation. There are records of Unitarians in Victoria in 1909, and of a Unitarian minister being here in 1911. “We” had a minister until 1919, then we were lay-led until 1927. I’m not sure why, but that Unitarian congregation closed down after its June 26th, 1927, service. In 1950, a new group began with monthly discussion group meetings in psychiatrist Dr. Douglas Alcorn’s office and in members’ homes. Alcorn called it “The Liberal Religious Fellowship of Victoria”; when the American Unitarian Association sent a charter document to Victoria the name was “The Unitarian Fellowship of Victoria.” The group remained small, numbering 14 to 17 members.

On October 12th, 1958, there was a charter registration that recorded 38 new members! This group met in rented facilities including at 106 Superior Street in James Bay. The first settled minister was Reverend Marvin Evans, 38 years old and newly graduated from Meadville Theological School. In 1963 the name was changed to The Unitarian Church of Victoria and in February 1966 a group of Unitarians bought the hall for $30,000. The Unitarian Church of Victoria occupied 106 Superior Street from 1964 until 1992. For a while after the Superior Street building was sold, the Unitarians met in the chapel at the Metropolitan United Church (now Alix Goolden Hall), on Quadra Street.

Rev. Dr. Stanley Sears was the minister from September 1985 until June 1989. For the next 18 months the congregation was lay-led, with sermons also by visiting ministers and emeritus minister Felix. The Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett was the interim minister here in 1991-92.

Konnae [died 2014] and her husband Harald Harresson [died 2000] had become active in 1986. Harald was in the Rotary Club of Oak Bay with the painter Ted Harrison [died 2014], and at a Christmas party in Oak Bay Konnae told Ted about the Unitarian Church; Ted attended Capital regularly until about 2009. Michelle Poirier went to the Superior Street church back when her first daughter, Adrienne, was an infant. Michelle tells me that she felt immediately at home when she walked into a gathering of Unitarians, and she valued the child care that the church provided. Michelle got involved in “Voice of Women” with Unitarian Marya Nyland, so there was another connection.

Allison Benner met Michelle Poirier Brown when they both worked at the BC Ministry of Women’s Equality in the 1990s. Allison and her daughter Anna attended regularly from 2008 to 2013.

In 1992 Bruce and May Partridge [MA-English, 1972, U. of Regina; PhD-Sociology, 1996, U. of Hong Kong; 2000-1993 sessional instructor in Introduction to Sociology, Canadian Society, and Sociology of Gender, UVic] moved to Victoria from Hong Kong. Bruce began attending services at Superior Street, while May was busy with other things. [Bruce was President of UVic, 1969-72; LL.B - UBC]

In September 1993 the Rev. Vann Knight arrived for eight years as “our” minister. In that momentous year, the decision was made to sell the under-sized building on Superior Street and to buy a former Mental Health building on 5.5 acres of land on West Saanich Road. [D’Estrube, p 43, notes that we got $460,000 for Superior St., and paid $875,000 for West Saanich.] Bruce got involved in planning the move of the congregation, and in June 1995 May Partridge and Diane Brown organized a symbolic walk to carry the flame from Superior Street, through Victoria, and up to the new, rural location.

But all was not well at the West Saanich Road congregation. Below is an excerpt from Shirley Wright d’Estrubé’s book “Unitarians in Victoria 1871-2001”:

If 1994 was the year it all came together, 1995 was the year it all nearly came apart. [...] In February we hosted the Pacific Northwest District AGM. Held in the beautiful Empress Hotel Conference Centre, organized and supervised by Jackie Spierman and Susie Williams, with nearly every able body volunteering to help...

d’Estrubé continues: However, the glow of enthusiasm was soon dimmed as an ugly conflict erupted in our ranks. The new Board met in May [1995] and differences of views on certain financial matters became acute. In the ensuing discussion some Board members felt insulted and unfairly attacked. The result was that several resignations from the Board and Finance Committee were tendered following the Board meeting in July. The initial points of difference related to whether the church faced a looming deficit and whether or not proper accounting had been followed in providing food services to youth delegates at the recent PNWD. [...the Vice President, Finance, resigned] In the turmoil the Treasurer and Secretary also resigned.

In spite of the Board’s efforts to bring about reconciliation, in late 1995 four families, including the Vice President of Finance and the Treasurer, announced that they were leaving the church and establishing a congregation in downtown Victoria. Several others followed. At first they met on Sundays in peoples’ homes, but the group kept out-growing the available living rooms.

Capital’s Beginnings

Notwithstanding the beautiful building, lovely location, full-time minister, and 45 years of history, the West Saanich location was difficult to reach for many of the Unitarians who lived in James Bay and did not have cars. In 1996 one of them, long-time member Margaret Lovesey, prodded Konnae and Harald to start a congregation in James Bay. May Partridge writes, “I remember Dave Speirman saying to me ‘Well, how hard can it be?’”

So, in 1996 four Unitarian couples decided to form a group near the old Superior Street location. Those founding members were Evelyn and Frank Buell, Dave and Jackie Spearman [who moved to San Diego in 1997], Harald and Konnae Harresson, and May and Bruce Partridge [who moved to Nanaimo in 2008]. They called themselves the ‘Pieces of Eight’ and they sometimes had their meetings in the Bent Mast Pub, just south of here. Another couple, long-time Unitarians Les Canty [died 2008] and Mary Canty, joined the Pieces of Eight soon after, and Marya Nyland also got in on the action.

Harald and Konnae were on the board of the James Bay New Horizons Centre, and Harald and Bruce negotiated terms for the rental every Sunday. In March 1996 there was great excitement among the eight organizers. H & K went to Seattle in about 1997 to buy hymnals.

In 1996 a happy coincidence happened on the Saturday before the opening day of this congregation. During visits to her daughter in Ottawa, Konnae attended the Unitarian church there, meeting people and no doubt talking about Unitarian doings in Victoria. On that Saturday in March, Konnae and Harald bumped into Ottawa Unitarians Rustom and Lien Patel. Konnae told them, “We’re starting a new congregation. Won’t you come?” Rustom and Lien officially joined in August 1996. In March 1996, with the fifty members that the Unitarian Universalist Association insisted on for the creation of a new congregation, Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation was official! And that’s what we are celebrating today.

Back then, Evelyn Buell and Marya Nyland founded our Social Responsibility Committee and got Capital involved in rallies for peace and environment, and in Gay Pride events each June. Marya, a non-stop worker for Unitarianism, made both of our banners: the one that we had up every Sunday for 19 years was designed by May Partridge’s daughter Sheila Archer, and sewn by Marya. With no minister and no plan to call one, Capital approved Sorcha McEwen as our first lay chaplain. The choir in 1996 included fourteen singers led by Ian Riddell, with Dr John Limbert at the piano. In 2003 John’s wife Lynne brought her sister June Waters to a Capital potluck; June started attending a few years ago.

…a contractor built the magnificent sanctuary that is now the home of First Unitarian. When it opened on April 4, 1999 the mood was celebratory! Also in 1999 the congregation voted to change its name to the First Unitarian Church of Victoria.

So far, what I’ve told you is historical. I’ve told you who started Capital, when they did it, and why. We have celebrated on many New Member Sundays, heaved sighs of relief after 20 AGM’s and 20 budget approvals, and mourned at many celebrations of life. Next, I am going to talk about stewardship. It’s not enough to set a sandwich board on the sidewalk and to put a few chairs down. As many of us can tell you, the business of running a congregation can also be hard work. But all of this work has a purpose – a joyful purpose – and that’s why we do it.

Stewardship centres on the notion that we do not own this. It is not ours to buy or sell. We are taking care of it for future generations. Twenty years ago, if the original ‘Pieces of Eight’ wanted simply to have Unitarian discussions in James Bay, they could have met in someone’s home or at a restaurant. But they wanted more. They wanted to build something that would last. And that’s stewardship.

During the spring of 2001 this congregation almost fell apart. But a group of committed individuals worked together to keep things going. Konnae, Bruce and May, Ben Dolf, Victoria Forsch, Alan Dawson, Elizabeth Atchison, Michelle Poirier, Norma Tener, Shurly Mazerolle, Lien and Rustom Patel and others kept the chalice burning. Not just for themselves, but because they saw benefits for the community if Capital continued to exist.

To steward this congregation – to nurture and care for it – the leaders of the day decided to concentrate on at least three areas: to make Sunday services as good as they can be, to make sure our financial house is always in order, and to make sure the routine administration gets done.

I’m not a big believer in the power of prayer, but if I had been here when we needed a finance person and an administrator, I would have prayed to get the Tarlings. Just when Capital Congregation needed them, Amanda and Graham and three-year-old Gemma moved here from Kingston, Ontario, ready to start a new life in Victoria. Graham likes to do finance stuff, and Amanda is an accomplished administrator. Today Gemma is our equipment manager and child care provider… continuity and change!

The reasons for the large population of First Nations people here for millennia included the abundant salmon in the water, the abundant camas flowers and their starchy bulbs, and the abundant warm weather. Many of us are transplants to Victoria for some of the same reasons!

At the end of the service, as is our custom, we will stand in a circle and sing the linking song. Then tea and fair-trade coffee will be served at the back. Today’s forum will be a time to share more of Capital’s history, but mostly I hope we will talk about Capital’s future! Let’s look at Capital today, specifically at what groundwork we have laid for our future.

For 3000 years the Lekwungen people thought James Bay was lovely and worth working for. In 1843 the Hudson’s Bay Company thought that this place was lovely and worth working for. In 1964 James Bay was attractive as the site of a Unitarian Church building. Twenty years ago, eight Unitarians felt that they needed to steward a renewed UU presence in James Bay. And today, with a clear sense of why we are here as a religious community, and with visions of our work and worship in the context of decades of Unitarian-Universalism in this neighbourhood, we look forward to Capital’s third decade!

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Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation -- By-Law Proposal

LIFE MEMBER

1. From time to time CUUC may choose to confer the status of “Life Member” on a person who,

a. has belonged to the congregation for a significant number of years;

b. has contributed significant time, talent and/or treasure to the vitality of the congregation; and

c. is alive to accept the honour.

2. A Life Member enjoys all the privileges of a regular member, including end-of-life services, without the obligation of making an annual financial contribution of record. A Life Member may vote in all congregational business meetings.

3. Anyone may propose a person as a Life Member. Upon receipt of such a proposal the Board or its appointee will compile a summary of the person’s activities in CUUC. The Board will consider that summary and then vote. Due to the esteem of the Life Member status, only a unanimous assent should lead to the designation of Life Member. [etc]

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**Ben Dolf** was born in Switzerland. He received professional training at university and then with the federal government. He was sent to Nepal to help villagers with development projects. Ben & Cathy moved to Victoria in 1990, from Nepal. A cousin was a UU in Vancouver, and Ben attended her wedding and was pleased. After about 5 years in Victoria he was looking for community, so he sought Capital.

"Benedikt Dolf" signed Capital's membership book on Dec 19, 1999, as our 72nd member. His wife Cathy Dolf was #73. (Dec 19/99 was a big day for membership: Sara Comish, Lena Toneff, Kimiko, Michelle Poirer & Doug Sprenger [their daughter Kathryn was 5] also signed up.)

At Capital, Ben has served in almost every leadership position. The April 17, 2000, minutes show that he was Treasurer. 2000 summer: Ben acted as chair during a summer of post-AGM conflict. Ben has served on the Sunday Service Committee, as a Sunday coordinator, on the Nominating Committee, and as an informal advisor to many leaders. He has stood up for the Forum, and has presented many thought-provoking homilies.

- Ben tells Peter he was "never president" but was "interim president" and treasurer, while also designing and printing the orders of service. He remembers most clearly that he was instrumental in sorting out the conflict; Peter Weiss & Ben Dolf started the Forum, for the congregation to get information.

[Feb 2016] Ben and Cathy have sold their Victoria house and moved into an apartment. They will likely move to Vancouver to be near kids and grandkids. Ben continues to participate in Capital activities, and I expect that he will until the last day.

- **formally granted ‘Life Member’ status on March 6, 2016**.

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**Rustom Patel** was born in 1915 in Bharnagar, India, north of Bombay. Rustom studied electrical engineering, and joined the Royal Indian Navy in 1943. At the end of the Second World War, Rustom sailed to England. Lien Van Balcum, a Dutch woman who was improving her English with a stint in London, went alone to Kensington Garden, for tea. Rustom and Lien were married in May 1949 and moved to Calcutta. The Arctic explorer Larsen had a sister who was Patel's neighbour in Calcutta. Larsen's daughter, Doreen, is a Unitarian. Lien became interested in Unitarianism through meeting Doreen. Rustom and Lien emigrated to Canada in 1959. In Ottawa, while Rustom worked for the federal government, Lien joined the Unitarian Church of Ottawa.

In 1960 Rustom accepted a job at the federal Ministry of Supply and Services, in the Department of Defence Production. When Rustom received his first paycheque in Ottawa, Lien insisted he give a portion to charity. Rustom gave $5 to the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). Sixty years later he continues to donate to USC. In Ottawa, Rustom and Lien began attending the Unitarian Church on Elgin Street. Lien and Rustom volunteered for Dr. Lotta Hitchmanova of the USC and the Unitarian Church. "We worked like slaves," Rustom laughs.

In Ottawa, Lien & Rustom had friends who had come from Calcutta: Olga and Subod Ghosh. The Ghoshes knew Konnae and Harold Harresson, who were Ottawa Unitarians. Ghosh's later had a home in Victoria. Lien & Rustom were friends of the Ghoshs for many years. That's how Lien met Konnae; Konnae is one of the founders of this congregation.

In 1996 the Ottawa winters were finally too much, so Lien & Rustom moved. Ayat Arif, a long-time friend, helped convince Rustom and Lien to move to Victoria. Here, with Konnae's encouragement, they joined Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation in August 1996 as members #31 and #32.

During Rustom’s almost twenty years as a member of this twenty year old congregation, he has given homilies, set up chairs, given sage advice, served on the board from May 2003 till May 2006 (age 91!), and supported his hard-working Unitarian wife, Lien.

[Lien Patel died peacefully on April 29, 2008 after a brief struggle with kidney failure.]

- **Rustom formally granted ‘Life Member’ status on March 6, 2016**.

Thank you today for all who made this service possible: Rita Wittman for decorating the memory table, Carol Smith for cake & soothing beverages, Rich Scales at the door, Dick Jackson and Cathy Baker for leading the music… to founders Bruce and May Partridge, and to sustainers including Rustom, Ben, Alan & Elizabeth, and so many of you, and all of you for being here today.

Chalice extinguisher on Mar 6, 2016: Lynda Mazerolle, who with her connection to parents Robert and Shurly Mazerolle, daughter Samantha, and granddaughter Marley, represents the past, present and future of Capital UU Congregation.