

INTRODUCTION

There is an image of the First Parish weathervane at the beginning of each chapter of this book. The vane's banner unfurls behind while its sharp arrow points to the future. So too are Unitarian Universalists greatly preoccupied with the way the wind is blowing *now*. Ever this worldly oriented to today's weather and that to come, whither we are going is greater concern than whence we have come. As Sharon Lawrence McDonald acknowledges, ours is a faith "that reveres the past but trusts the dawning future more."

In her new book "*A Meeting House & its People; the Story of the First Parish in Bedford*", author and historian, McDonald, talks about a group of people living in the area now known as Bedford, Massachusetts who grew tired of these Sunday trips and decided to do something about this burden.

They petitioned the Great and General Court of Massachusetts asking to become a separate town from Concord and Billerica whose churches they had been attending. Writing, "Behold what a weariness is it", they expressed their need to build their own house of worship. Fortunately, the General Court granted the request and in 1729, the town of Bedford was born. There were conditions, though. The Court required that the new town establish a school, build a house of worship, and hire "a learned and orthodox minister of good conversation".

Bedford was well on its way to fulfilling the requirements as they had already started building the house of worship even before hearing the court's decision. In 1730, their first minister, Nicholas Bowes, was called. He stayed with the church for 25 years, until 1755 when a disagreement grew between him and the congregation, resulting in his resignation.

Bedford's second minister, Reverend Nathaniel Sherman also ran afoul of the congregation as did its third minister, Joseph Penniman. The church's fourth minister, Reverend Samuel Stearns, was beloved by many, and he too left; but this time, it was to take a good many of the congregation with him. Like many churches in New England the Bedford church divided along theological grounds. Having overseen the building of the church that now stands on the Bedford Common, Stearns found himself without a building and at first held Sunday services at his home until a parishioner who stayed with the original church gave those who followed Reverend Stearns a piece of land on

which to build what became the First Church of Christ Congregational. McDonald writes a compelling story of the early ministers, showing the changes in society that were happening around New England and in other parts of the United States. The changing religious views and the division between church and state is well documented, showing how those larger changes were affecting the small farming community of Bedford.

McDonald also documents the history of the many ministers who stood in the pulpit from 1832 to 1954 as the church survived through tough and turbulent periods when wars were fought, and financial times were hard. Her description of those who came and went illustrates how hard the congregation tried to stay together as a viable body of worshippers. During these times of the church floundering, McDonald pays tribute to the dedication of the women of the church who tried in so many ways to keep vibrancy alive in the church community through groups such as the Women's Alliance whose shared projects and leadership roles helped hold the church together.

In 1954, with the little town of Bedford beginning a population explosion amid other changes, the church sent out a call for a full-time minister. The Reverend David C. Pohl answered the call, and for the first time in many years the congregation had its pulpit filled by its own called minister. From that time through the effective and exceptional ministries of Reverend Henry Holmes, Reverend David Weissbard, Reverend William F. Schulz III, Reverend Jack Mendelsohn, Reverend Douglas Morgan Strong and Reverend John Eric Gibbons, McDonald shows how the congregation grew into the vibrant church community that those women had dreamed would come to fruition.

McDonald tells the story of how First Parish grew into not only an important congregation in the town, but also in the Unitarian-Universalist denomination and then into the wider world. Accompanying the text are many photographs illustrating the history of this extraordinary church.

McDonald's love of and pride in the Town of Bedford and the First Parish in Bedford shines through as her research builds into the story of a determined people changing with the times yet holding firm to principles that bind them together.

McDonald is also the author of *The Bedford Flag Unfurled*, a history of Bedford's Colonial flag and now serves as Bedford's Town Historian.