

Reverend Hank Peirce reaches out to his Congregation and our town



BY DAVID MARONEY

Reverend Hank Peirce was recently elected as the new settled minister of our Unitarian Universalist Church (UUCR) succeeding interim minister Catherine Senghas who served in that capacity for the specified period of the past 2 years.

For those of us not familiar with the history of Reading's Unitarian Universalist Church, it traces its beginnings back to 1827 when a "line of forward thinking, deep caring souls supported a liberal pulpit, teaching the next generation, tending each other, governing and financing their enterprise".

There were many changes in composition, Unitarian affiliations and name over the ensuing years but not its tradi-



REVEREND HANK PEIRCE

tion of "service, friendliness, and loyalty to serve as an influence for good in the community".

As testimony to its inclusiveness and diversity, the chancel archway in the sanctuary includes the Christian Cross, Star of David, symbols of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in addition to their more traditional lamp of knowledge, their circle of eternity and flaming chalice.

The Unitarian Universalist Church has been in its current location at the corner of Summer Avenue and Woburn Street since 1924 when it was

built. Prior to that, the church was located in Reading Square in a building it built in 1870. It has been known as the "Unitarian Universalist

Church of Reading" since 1969 and today, its congregation flourishes with over 300 active adult members and about 100 children. Their mission is to: (1) nurture and explore individual spirituality; (2) build a committed and loving community; and (3) heal the world.

Reverend Hank Peirce comes to Reading with a rich background, first in secular pursuits and then in his dedication to a religious life. After high school graduation in New Bedford, he attended UMass Amherst before leaving to try his hand at such earthly things as landscaping and carpentry as well as entertaining ones being in a punk rock band and working as a roadie for several bands travelling the country and world. All this before getting his spiritual calling and reentering UMass

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in Boston to study religion. His parents were a great influence in Hank's being raised a Unitarian Universalist and his subsequent decision to enter ministry.

His parents met and were married at St. Mark's Unitarian Universalist Church in Edinburgh, Scotland. His dad, Kenneth, was an 8th grade science teacher for 36 years and his mother, Maggie, was born in Belfast, County Down, Northern Ireland. Hank has a twin sister, Cora, who is a social worker in the New Bedford area.

Other influences in growing his Unitarian Universalist faith were major church events he participated in with his friends as Liberal Religious Youth and Young Religious Unitarian Universalists as well as his own beliefs about humanity, nature, the universe and himself.

The moment Hank knew in his youth that he would always be a Universalist happened when he walked into the parish hall of the stately Concord Unitarian Universalist church to witness wildly dressed youth running around and making an incredible racket.

"It was at that moment, in the middle of the chaos, that a sense of calm came over me. I knew I was home and found my tribe. From that point on, there was no other group of people I would want to be with more."

After graduating from UMass in Boston, Hank attended the Meadville/Lombard Theological School in Chicago but found the school focused on Unitarian Universalist culture, a subject he was an expert in.

He applied and was accepted at the Andover-Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, MA where he would graduate and then be ordained a Unitarian Universalist minister by his boyhood church in New Bedford.

His first assignment was in Auburn, ME and after a year of inspirational, ministerial learning, he served 12 years in Medford before accepting an interim position in Westford where he was the first Unitarian Universalist minister in 40 years. Other assignments included Sabbatical Minister for the Stow and Acton churches as well as Interim Minister for the Milton church before coming

to Reading this summer.

Rev. Hank perceives that his greatest challenge in coming to Reading is getting to know everyone in essentially a "bedroom" community where many folks work out of town during the day. He plans to nurture their spiritual lives, create a beloved community where people can live out their principles and help each other, as well as reach out to Reading and surrounding communities with his message that church can be relevant, meaningful and fun. He is particularly concerned about some of our youth feeling disenfranchised in this social media driven world of ours with some resorting to addiction. He feels that parents as well as the church may be particularly helpful in righting the ship to giving more meaning to their lives. Towards that end, the Reading Clergy Association, which Rev. Hank immediately signed up for, plans to address addiction in their respective church services the last weekend in September.

Rev. Hank derives his greatest satisfaction in being in a community making real connections across the generations, firmly believing that our world is made up of stories, no atoms. Getting folks to mingle with folks is an integral part of his mission. He reminds us of Shakespeare's saying that "all that is past is prologue", and Joe Strummer's corollary that "the future is unwritten".

Somewhere in between lies the fodder for good storytelling. For his congregation and Reading, he believes that regular church attendance can make a difference in people's lives. It is the place where you can restore trust through community interaction which may help restore some of the trust lost in our institutions.

He is concerned that we're approaching the end of a 500-year cycle in Western history which begins with an upheaval, then codification and then upheaval again as people don't like to be constrained.

The last upheaval began with the Protestant Reformation in 1517. Rev. Hank believes you may substitute from the Reformation, societies first building, then losing trust in their institutions and then collapsing.

He is thrilled to be here at UUCR with a great staff in a

creative community church with a solid representation across the generations. He is delighted to be able to redefine the distinguished Universalist Minister Hosea Ballou's centuries old coinage of "happyfication" to his church: making a community's religion more relevant and meaningful in a joyful manner.

Rev. Hank has an expansive ministry which appears in Social Media and includes (1) The VUU, the Church of the Larger Fellowship; The Hot Stove Report on Facebook; and the Punk Advent Calendar, a yearly spiritual discipline involving culture and religion in the lead up to Christmas.

He currently resides in Medford with his wife Rebecca Scott who is the Senior Director of Development and Alumni Relations at Tufts University. They were married in 2002 and have two daughters: Ruth, age 12, and Bethiah, who just turned 10 and considers it a great achievement.