

The Rev. Dr. Charles W. Eddis

July 7, 1926-May 22, 2021

Born and raised in Toronto, Canada, Charles attended St. Andrews College in Aurora, Ontario from 1937-1944. Though drawn to science and fascinated with radios, he decided in his senior year to give up the idea of a career in science, anticipating the age of nuclear weapons which would appear two years later. He completed high school focusing his studies on a modern history and languages instead. During a year of service in the Canadian navy he read extensively in philosophy and became a Unitarian. After the war, while attending the University of Toronto doing his BComm, he began attending the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto. In 1948, in charge of American Unitarian Youth (AUY) international relations, he attended conferences in Europe and visited Unitarian churches and youth groups in Eastern and Western Europe. He wrote and spoke about his experiences in "Peoples Democracies." He rose to become the President of American Unitarian Youth (U.S. and Canada) in 1949. Associating with Universalist as well as Unitarian youth since 1948, he was present when the first steps were taken that would unite the two youth movements in Liberal Religious Youth in 1953. He served on the first Program Committee of the UUA for three years.

He settled in Cambridge MA, attending the Harvard Divinity School from 1949-1951. As a student minister in Whitman, MA 1950-1951, he discovered his vocation as a parish minister. Dean Speary urged all budding clergy to find a permanent place to summer as a constant in a profession that led to many relocations. The family cottage became the place to recharge, study, research for fall sermons and write papers for the various study groups he was part of. He also went to Meadville Theological School in Chicago to round out his studies and pursue his interest in philosophy. Meadville would later honour him with a Doctor of Divinity in 1979.

In Chicago, the lengthening shadow of McCarthyism alienated him from the country which had felt like home. He resolved to work in Canada, so long as he could make a contribution in his native land. He was sent by the American Unitarian Association to develop a group of 25 persons in Edmonton, Alberta into a Unitarian church. He served the church in Edmonton from 1953-1958. He became President of the Western Canada Unitarian Conference. He also saw the need for a council to link the Unitarians across Canada together.

While in Edmonton Charles also became vice president of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, in which he remained active after the move to Montreal. He was an officer of the Friends of the Indians Society, and its fraternal delegate to meetings of the Indian Association of Alberta.

In 1958, he moved to Pointe Claire, a suburb of Montreal, Quebec, to help a new group of Unitarians meeting there become a full-fledged independent church. His happiest and saddest years were as minister of the Lakeshore Unitarian Church from 1958-1966. He saw the congregation grow from a fellowship to a strong church with a much enlarged and modernized building. It was a large, close-knit community, with a booming religious education program, significant public forums and social events. Many in the congregation were of an age similar to his own. The saddest event was the sudden infant death of his and Nancy's first child, Pamela. A dining room in an orphanage in India was made in her memory through the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). Charles had been working with Dr. Lotta Hitschmanova of the USC, setting up her local visits beginning in 1953 and continued doing so until the mid-1970's.

He was active in the Bicultural Association which met at the Lakeshore Unitarian Church with a group of French Canadians from Montreal east end to share and compare histories and differences. This made Charles feel completely at home in Quebec for the first time.

Charles was invited to join a committee to form a conference of Ontario and Quebec congregations. He quickly saw that an intermediary step to create a national body was superfluous. He proposed the immediate formation of the Canadian Unitarian Council, and was its first president from 1961-1964.

In 1966, he returned to the United States to serve as the minister of the Unitarian Church of Evanston, a large multi-staff church, in Illinois outside Chicago. There he became the president of the ecumenical Evanston Ministerial Association and a leader in the successful daily demonstrations in 1968 leading to the enactment of laws in Evanston to end racial discrimination in housing. For this he received the Citizen of the Year award from the Chessmen, a black service club, along with the Rev. Jacob Blake, the co-leader of the demonstrations. He worked with Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, making several trips to Washington. He set up draft counseling on the Chicago North Shore. He became the chair of the Evanston Ecumenical Action Council, the successor to the Evanston Council of Churches. During his years of service there the Evanston Unitarian church went through a renewal, emerging with an improved completed building, and a strong music program.

In 1972, Charles and family did a six-month pulpit exchange with the Rev. Islwyn Pritchard, serving churches northeast of Manchester: Padiham, Todmorden, and Accrington. That summer he attended the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) Congress in Heidelberg, Germany and became the vice president of the North American Chapter and its newsletter editor.

Charles returned to Canada in 1977 to serve the Unitarian church he first entered decades earlier while in naval uniform: the Unitarian Church of Montreal, formerly known as The Church of the Messiah. Dispirited by the mass exodus of members to Toronto in those heady days of the ascendancy of the French language and politics, he kept the church on a steady course that held hope. He joined in the Greater Montreal Unitarian congregations' submission to the Royal Commission on Biculturalism and Bilingualism.

In greater Montreal he was active in the peace movement, concerned about nuclear weapons in Canada, the hydrogen bomb, and nuclear testing. This work included leading Project Ploughshares Montreal local group, convening and chairing the Montreal Disarmament Committee which hired and filled 32 busloads of demonstrators for the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982.

Active as a Canadian board member of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), in 1982 he organized and led ecumenical services in Mary Queen of the World. Charles was an active member of Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal for 34 years and served as its president for five years. He visited Israel with a group of leaders in Canadian Christian-Jewish dialogue in 1983 as he had in 1976 with a group of Illinois leaders in religion and education. In 1984 during the Pope's visit to Montreal Charles sat in the dignitaries' section with the Prime Minister and others having received an invitation through a WCRP connection. He was interviewed by McLean's magazine on the impact of the Pope's visit for all churches. During the Mass he had his sermon writing pen, a Parker 51, blessed.

In 1987, the Church of the Messiah suffered a disastrous fire which destroyed much of the gothic building that had stood proudly on Sherbrooke Street for eighty years. Unitarians have had a presence in Montreal since the 1820's with the present congregation founded in 1842. The spacious sanctuary collapsed, its walls knocked down as a public menace. Only the social hall, the offices, and the adjoining house next door remained. At the emergency meeting of the congregation held the following Friday evening it became clear that the congregation was determined to keep going. New church facilities were designed as part of shared space with a high rise apartment building on the site the church owned. A slump in real estate derailed the project as the proposals were before Montreal City Council. The church started over again, ending up selling its prime location and finding a new location of its own.

Areas of service

First president of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada 1977-1980

Spent considerable time on ministerial compensation & cross-border pension taxation issues

Vice President of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association 1981-1983.

Secretary of the CUC Board of Trustees

Regional Director of Meadville Conference

Supervised & encouraged numerous student ministerial interns

Greenfield Group 1959-1966

Prairie Group member 1966-2000

UU United Nation Office Board

Project Ploughshares Montreal local group

Christian-Jewish Dialogue

Centre Refuge

Retirement:

Upon retirement he was made Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Montreal. He and Nancy lived for a year in Australia and New Zealand, serving churches in Adelaide and Auckland.

Wrote Stephen Fritchman: The American Unitarians and Communism, published 2011

Charles continued to be active in many of the groups he had served with over the years.

Archival Material:

His sermons & other writings are housed in the Harvard University Archives.