

## “Is Unitarianism Growing?”

by Charles E. St. John

Recently it was my privilege to assist at the dedication of the new church in Pittsburg,--a stone edifice of uncommon dignity and beauty, costing with the land about \$70,000. On that day of the fulfillment of sturdy hopes, audiences of five hundred or more persons crowded the church morning and evening. I wonder if the occasion meant more to any one than it did to me? The new church had risen as by magic since my last visit to Pittsburg, and there were many new faces in the congregation. Nevertheless, there were mine own people before me, the trusty souls with whom I had shared nine years of hard work over small things; and, as I spoke to them again, how I loved them! How I rejoiced to tell them that the noble building was nothing more than they deserved!

As bearing upon the question of the growth of Unitarianism, it may be helpful to contrast the present condition of the Pittsburg church with those years of small things. In 1889 the movement was begun, under the guidance of Secretary Morehouse, by about a dozen persons. Soon Rev. J. G. Townsend was made the first pastor. He served with great ability and devotion, but was compelled by ill-

health to resign in less than two years. I was summoned to step into the breach. My installation took place in October, 1891, in a dismal, down-town hall, where less than fifty persons assembled to hear the words of a group of our ablest ministers,--such men as Slicer, Williams, Hosmer, and Reynolds.

Exactly two years later an assembly of perhaps three hundred persons dedicated a little wooden church which had been made possible by denominational assistance. By exhausting every home resource we raised about \$3,600. Friends in other Unitarian societies gave us about \$7,000. We bought a lot for \$10,000, erected and equipped a church for about \$8,500, and faced the future with an interest-bearing debt of \$9,500, the church Building Loan Fund not being able under such conditions to help us.

In its first year this society was aided by the [American Unitarian] Association to the amount of \$2,000. In the second year it received \$1,500. Thereafter the society asked for less and less each year until 1897, when it became self-supporting, the current expenses for that year being \$3,600. In 1899 by purely local effort \$3,500 was paid on the debt, and the remaining \$6,000 was transferred to the Church Building Loan Fund, the annual installments of \$600 in repayment being thereafter met when due.

Meanwhile the society had been steadily increasing in numbers and gaining an influence in the city. This growth continued and still continues under Rev. L.

W. Mason, who succeeded to the pastorate in 1900. Mr. Mason has added to his consecrated service so admirable a business sagacity that under his management a sale of the property of the society has been effected for \$61,500. Additional money has been raised at home to pay off what was still due to the Loan Fund, which means that during the current year the society will have raised about \$11,000. And with their magnificent \$70,000 property the society owns a strip of land which can presently be sold as a house-lot for enough to pay off all indebtedness resting on the new building.

I call this a record of growth, a progression that has held its pace for fifteen years in a city of conservative theology and worldly spirit, where every influence of the so-called "social world" has been against us, and the weak-kneed have held aloof. I consider the Pittsburg record proof that it is worth while to give large denominational assistance to new and struggling societies, even where what is thus given is at first in large excess over what is locally raised. For the Pittsburg church is a type, not an exception. What has been done there can be done in every American city. Furthermore, it has been done to a greater or less extent, but always with advance in many places during these same fifteen years. Think, for instance, of Albany, Brooklyn, Dallas, Derby, Erie, Fort Fairfield, Helena, Harlem, Indianapolis, Montclair, Natick, Ottawa, Orange, Pueblo, St. Cloud, Salem, Ohio, Salem, Ore., Salt Lake City, Santa Cruz, and Worcester, among the many that

might with justice be mentioned. These growing sprigs of one Unitarian vine far outnumber any shrivelled leaves there may be upon it. There are indifferent Unitarians, and in some places they are conspicuously in evidence; but we can outnumber and outweigh them with the true and unselfish souls in our ranks that are trying to practise their religion.

There are some spots where Unitarian churches are less strong than formerly. This decay (whether temporary or irredeemable) is due in part to the open adoption of our fundamental principles by other denominations and in part to general causes which affect churches of other denominations quite as severely as ourselves. But when an investigator desires to form an opinion as to the vitality of the Unitarian body, why does he so often content himself with a glance at the few societies that have lost their grip? Would he not more truly honor his intelligence by giving due heed to the Unitarian churches that have the firm grasp, the high vision, and the bright halo of fresh achievements?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. St. John, "Is Unitarianism Growing?," Christian Register, May 5, 1905.