

By the 1760s, the inhabitants of the southerly part of the Town of Bolton were becoming more numerous. In 1766 they petitioned to become a separate community. The chief reason was to reduce the distance of travel to public worship, particularly in winter. A similar petition was granted in 1778 with the incorporation of the South Parish of Bolton by the General Court of Massachusetts. The Church of Christ of that parish was gathered at an ecclesiastical council of the churches of Northborough, Westborough, Shrewsbury and Stow on April 6, 1779. The Covenant was signed by twenty-five men the following day. While their wives did not also sign, they were apparently included as members and their deaths were recorded by the Church accordingly.

A piece of land was given by Samuel Jones, the local innkeeper, for a meeting house place. The Parish raised the First Meeting House on June 16th of that year. It was located near the present flagpole on the Common. This building was typical of the Puritan meeting houses of its time. It resembled a large white barn with windows. Inside it had some open seats, but was mostly divided into family pews, particularly around the sides. There was a gallery on three sides and a high pulpit in the middle of the back wall. It had no heat. The worshippers brought hot coals from home in tiny footstoves to provide meager warmth while listening to sermons often of two hours' duration. The building was not completely finished until 1794 due to the difficult economic times following the Revolutionary War.

Rev. Reuben Puffer was ordained as the first settled minister in 1781. His parsonage was built on the site of 48 Pleasant Street. He served faithfully for forty-eight years. He was chosen to give the annual sermon before the Governor and the Legislature in 1803 at the Old South Meeting House in Boston. He delivered the annual Dudleian Lecture at Harvard College in 1808, in recognition of which he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity. These were considerable honors for the minister of a small, outlying town. Dr. Puffer continued as pastor to the people of Berlin until his death in 1829. In his later years he was part of the more conservative religious movement of the time.

In the meantime, the South Parish had been incorporated as the District of Berlin in 1784 and the Town of Berlin in 1812. In Puritan Massachusetts, parish business was then done by the Town in the smaller communities. The Town decided to replace the First Meeting House in 1826. That building was moved to 16 South Street and served as a barn until 1897, when it was razed.

The New Meeting House (still in use today) was dedicated with Dr. Puffer preaching on November 25, 1826. Its simple Federal architecture made it a focal point for the community. It also had a three-stage tower and was equipped with a bell. As originally constructed it had one main room inside, two stories in height, with an elevated pulpit and galleries around the sides and back of the room.

Division and Change

Following the death of Dr. Puffer, there was controversy over the selection of his successor. As the more liberal members controlled the First Parish, the conservative members withdrew and formed the Evangelical Congregational Society. The Evangelical Meeting House was built at 5 Linden Street and served the congregation from 1830 to 1843. This group had four ministers during those years. The Evangelical building was later used as an academy, a shoe shop, and as the two-tenement residence it is today.

This division of the church was part of a broad controversy in New England during that time, which had led to organization of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. While the liberals in the First Parish never formally became Unitarian, we know that the name was used informally. The liberal First Parish had two ministers during the thirteen years of division.

This was a period when social causes were important. Both antislavery and temperance groups were active in Berlin, with the ministers of the two churches among the leaders.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts legally separated church and state in 1833. With that action, the First Parish lost its power to tax the public for its support. Following several years of financial problems, the Liberal Congregationalists of the First Parish and the Evangelical Congregationalists decided to reunite in 1843. Since the latter were the stronger group, the First Parish employed Evangelical preachers thereafter. Rev. Henry Adams served for a decade. He built the house at 27 Central Street for his home.

Rev. William A. Houghton was the next minister. Born in Berlin in 1812, he was an 1840 graduate of Yale College. He had previously served the Congregational Church in Northborough. He resided at the old Puffer parsonage on Pleasant Street, taking over ownership from the Widow Puffer, who remained there for the rest of her life. Mr. Houghton was a notable local personage. In addition to his work as Pastor, he served on the Town's school committee and was the community's most respected public speaker. Rev. Mr. Houghton retired from the ministry in 1878 after a period of ill health. He continued to build his knowledge of the history of Berlin and its families. He was the author of the History of the Town of Berlin, which was published by the Town in 1895, after his death in 1891.

The Ladies' Benevolent Society of the Church was organized in 1840 as the town's first women's organization. It grew and prospered, encouraging mission service and serving as an intellectual outlet for its members. The Society met at the

homes of members. The Ladies would be joined by their families for a meal at the end of the day. With such gatherings sometimes numbering over one hundred, they outgrew the capacity of their homes.

The Meeting House was remodeled in 1860. A full second floor was constructed at the level of the former galleries. Two meeting rooms were constructed on the first floor to house the Sunday School and such social functions as the Ladies' meetings. The former gallery columns were installed in the larger Central Hall. The ceiling of the upstairs auditorium was arched into the attic to give more space overhead. A wooden structure, reinforced by iron rods, was constructed above the ceiling to provide the needed support for the walls and roof. A pair of curved stairways gave access to this new auditorium. The exterior of the Meeting House was not changed by this reconstruction, leaving the original design intact. The Town Clock, a bequest of one of the church members, was placed in the tower of the Meeting House in 1882.

Other Religious Groups

The more liberal religious thinkers of Berlin organized again in 1871 as the Friends of Liberal Preaching. Officially named the First Unitarian Society a year later, the organization first met in the Town Hall. In 1882 they built their church building at 24 Central Street. Later in that decade, the Society received a gift of \$20,000 from Chandler Carter to support liberal preaching. Much increased in value, this fund continues to assist the First Parish Church today. The Unitarian Society built a large barn for the use of the members in 1895. After the coming of the automobile, the barn was converted into the Parish Hall in 1926. In addition to religious and social functions, the hall was and is used for basketball and other athletic activities.

The longest serving minister of the Unitarian Society was Rev. Ivan A. Klein (1925-1940). In addition to serving the pastoral needs of his congregation, Mr. Klein was a leader of dramatic productions and other community activities. He is credited with painting the scene on the stage curtain in the Berlin Town Hall.

Ministers of the First Parish Church of Berlin since 1947

Rev. Marshall Jenkins, Congregational interim October 1947-February 1948
Rev. Guy E. Mossman, Congregational February 1948-September 1954
Rev. Robert W. MacNeill, Congregational September 1951-September 1954
Rev. Andrew Rosenberger, Unitarian interim September 1954-November 1954
Rev. John W. Linzee, Unitarian ordained in Berlin November 1954-October 1957
Rev. Leonard W. Gray, Congregational October 1957-October 1961
Rev. Morley F. Hodder, United Church of Canada interim November 1961-June 1962
Rev. James Z. Hanner, Unitarian Universalist June 1962-September 1966
Rev. Howard A. Andrews, United Church of Christ November 1966-November 1977
Rev. Russell E. Angell, United Church of Christ interim November 1977-September 1978
Rev. Marshall B. Hughes, United Church of Christ October 1978-June 1983
Rev. Russell E. Angell, United Church of Christ interim July 1983-Nov. 1983
Rev. Winifred C. Jones, United Church of Christ November 1983-September 1990
Rev. Stephen H. Furrer, Unitarian Universalist interim January 1991-July 1993
Rev. Nancy Hayes Kilgore, United Church of Christ interim August 1993-October 1993
Rev. Barbara E. Aiello United Church of Christ ordained in Berlin October 1993-June 2003
Rev. Richard E. Wright, United Church of Christ interim September 2003-October 2004
Rev. Duke T. Gray, Unitarian Universalist interim January 2005-September 2007
Rev. Nora A. Fitzpatrick, United Church of Christ, November 2007 - December 2008
Rev. Oscar Wallace, United Church of Christ, ordained in Berlin, March 2009 - March 2016
Rev. Frieda Gillespie, Unitarian Universalist, interim, September 2016 - present

After a Methodist preacher, Rev. Alfred S. Durston, substituted at the Congregational Church in the 1870s, a group of people organized the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. Meeting first in the Town Hall, this church constructed its building at the corner of Carter and Walnut Streets in 1887. Another pastor was Rev. Frederick A. Krackhardt 1911-13. Mr. Krackhardt married a Berlin girl and made his home here after a few more years of ministry elsewhere. He was author of the 1959 History of the Town of Berlin.

Among those who grew up in the Methodist Church were the Woodward brothers. They were Berlin's only war dead of World War I. Wallace was killed in France and his brother Sumner died in the 1918 flu epidemic at Fort Devens. In 1924 the Church installed a round, stained glass window in their memory. The window was saved when the church closed out its affairs in 1940. It was subsequently installed in the Meeting House of the First Parish in 1949. That window is pictured on this website. Many of the former Methodist members later joined the First Parish Church.

We also have a Quaker strand in our history. The Bolton Monthly Meeting of Friends was formed in 1779. Its meeting house was located just over the town line in Bolton, and at least a third of its members resided in Berlin. This group became part of the Bolton Federated Church in 1931. Over the years a number of its former members have joined the First Parish Church or worshipped with us.

Meanwhile the Congregational Church had been served by several shorter term pastors. Among those was Rev. Charles S. Washburn. He was notable for his work with young people, founding the Christian Endeavor Union in 1887. The Rev. Alfred S. Durston returned to Berlin as settled pastor of the Congregational Church from 1918-1922. Older members recalled him as an emotional preacher. He also worked for many years in the Y.M.C.A.

The next Congregational pastor was Rev. Louis G. Hudson, a native of Newfoundland. Mr. Hudson served for twenty-five years (1922-1947). He supplemented his church income by doing building projects. He constructed the first houses on Oak Street. He also made many improvements in the Meeting House. These included building the stage in Central Hall, laying the hardwood floor in that room, and finishing the Felton Room (choir room) on the second floor. Mr. Hudson also conducted a mission chapel in the Robin Hill area of Marlborough. He brought many members into the Berlin Church through that connection.

The addition was constructed at the back of the Meeting House in 1930, to provide an additional stairway for emergencies. Other uses of that added space today include rest rooms, kitchen space, and the choir room. To make way for that project, the Congregational barn (built in 1899) was removed to 103 Carter Street, where it continues to house the Town highway department.

Working Together as a Diverse Congregation

After the departure of a minister in 1946, the members of the First Unitarian Society approached the First Congregational Church to consider forming a federated church. Following due deliberation the federated church was formed in 1947 under the name First Parish Church. The two groups have worshipped and worked together as one congregation since that time. The former groups maintain their denominational affiliations: the Congregational Church with the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Society with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The Auditorium of the Meeting House was remodeled in 1949. The former central pulpit became an altar with pulpit and lectern stands on either side. The Unitarian Church building was rebuilt in 1955-56, becoming the Children's Church. It houses the Sunday School, Nursery School and the church offices. The Rice Memorial Chapel on its second floor utilizes the Gothic elements of the former Unitarian Church.

Among the pastors since the federation, Rev. Howard A. Andrews had the longest service 1966-1977. Mr. Andrews had been an Army chaplain in World War II and after. This fitted him well for serving our diverse congregation. He served actively in bodies of both denominations. Among his interests was providing retirement housing in Berlin. The Church organized Berlin Retirement Homes, Inc., which opened the subsidized housing at Northbrook Village in 1980.

During the pastorates of Rev. Marshall B. Hughes and Rev. Winifred C. Jones, the Church had renewed interest in social issues. These led to establishment of the Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Fund for minority education, and the divestment of stocks in companies doing business in South Africa. Rev. Barbara Aiello was our pastor for nearly ten years from 1993 to 2003. Her very successful pastorate was notable for increasing our ministry to families with children.

In recent years, improvements have been made in the Meeting House to provide access for wheelchairs and those with difficulty walking. An elevator was installed in 1991 and the rest rooms were made accessible in 1997. A new sound system was installed in 2002, including individual listening devices for people with hearing difficulties.

Following a mission statement workshop in the fall of 1991, the First Parish Church adopted a new covenant in 1992. It is found at the head of our home page. Prayed as part of our public worship services, it guides our work together as a church. Among its elements is an affirmation of our diversity. One expression of this is our use of three hymnals. Singing the Living Tradition (UUA, 1993) and the New Century Hymnal (UCC, 1995) express the breadth of thought of our two denominations in modern language which is sensitive to gender and other issues of inclusion. We also retain our Pilgrim Hymnal (1958) for its Christmas carols and other traditional resources not included in the newer books.

A living, active church is ever renewing itself. So it is with us. Our present and future members and friends will have their part in molding our history in the coming days and years.

