

## **The Long and Winding Road to Accessibility at Restoration**

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Eric asked me if I would share with you all a history of our efforts here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration in Mt. Airy towards becoming as accessible as possible to people in wheelchairs and with other physical ability differences. I have been interested in this issue, in part because of Fred Small's song that I just sang for you, but also in my capacity as the coordinator of the Folk Factory Coffeehouse. At times in the past, we had accommodated people in wheelchairs at Folk Factory events by pushing them up the hill to the sanctuary or carrying wheelchairs down the stairs to the basement, but these measures don't reflect the dignity that people in wheelchairs deserve to be treated with. Other people have inquired about whether Folk Factory events were accessible, and have not come when told of our layout. Our former minister Bonnie-Jeanne Casey's own brother could not attend her Installation in his wheelchair in a dignified way. She did get us to put in pew cutouts to make room for wheelchairs in the sanctuary, but without a proper way to get in at the time, this was more symbolic than meaningful.

Let's start at the beginning. In 1995, Folk Factory raised \$10,000 from the People's Music Network Gathering (the event that the Community Quilt on the sanctuary back wall was made for) specifically for special needs, such as sign language interpreters (which were used for many years at concerts, and are now done by request), childcare for parents at concerts (which we still provide), and to make progress toward wheelchair accessibility. A couple of years later, Folk Factory offered a contribution of \$3000 to UUCR toward wheelchair accessibility if the church would match the contribution, but no action was taken at the time, except to get a walk-through look by an architect specializing in accessibility, with some rough ballpark estimates of costs.

In October of 1996, Dave Simpson brought in a consultant to look at the possibility of stair glides from the ground level of Hale Hall down to Fellowship Hall, and some ramp and other accessibility accommodations. He advised against stair glides, as he doubted we would be granted the needed variances, especially since we had a nursery school in the building at the time. He also recommended a permanent outside access ramp into the sanctuary, as the design inside made an indoor option not really possible. The main result of this effort was the creation of 3 Handicapped Parking spaces in front of the church, with signs indicating parking was restricted for this purpose all day Sunday.

A few years later, Folk Factory offered another contribution, this time only being able to afford about \$1200, to pay 1/3 of the cost of an architectural study to outline what needed to be done for wheelchair accessibility, if the church would pay the rest. Again, no action was taken except another walk-through with a different architect. Then in 2003-2004, Steve Workman pledged to match individual contributions of up to \$5000 for what he called the "50/50" to make progress on accessibility, and we raised over \$11,000 from the generosity of members and Steve. \$3000 of this money was designated for the architectural study, and we received the study in November of 2004.

The **architect's study** came up with a **design** for becoming fully accessible, primarily using a creative elevator design, located across the hall from Gloria's office, that could open in two different directions: toward Gloria's office, and also toward the Hale ground floor hall (coat closet),

reaching all levels of our facility except the sanctuary directly. A ramp would go up to the sanctuary door in the hall outside Gloria's door, and Kathy's office would be accessed only through Gloria's office (Kathy's current door would be removed and Gloria's moved toward the Duo Room). One bathroom on every level would be made wheelchair accessible, doors would be widened, and some kind of ramp could be added for front entry into the sanctuary if desired. The study estimated a total cost of around \$250,000 for *all* of these components.

In the Fall of 2004, the UUCR Task Force on Accessibility was formed to make recommendations to the Board about how to best spend the remaining money from Steve's 50/50 (about \$8000). In our initial meeting, we considered that modification of one of the Hale Lounge level bathrooms might be possible for around \$8000, but having a stair glide from the Duo Room to the basement seemed a higher priority for current members having trouble with our stairs.

Harald Grote recommended against the stair glides as a significant liability risk. Harald also shared his belief that installing a chair glide would probably delay a *true* solution for people with mobility impairments far into the future and would diffuse our momentum. The consensus of the task force then focused on finding a way to implement the full accessibility plan of the study or a modified version as soon as possible, to show our caring and concern for those current members having trouble getting around now. Harald expressed concerns that some of the study's cost estimates could be too low (the unusual elevator design and other factors could possibly add significant amounts). We decided that we should probably use a working figure of something more in the area of \$300-350,000 for the project, for planning purposes, and the architect agreed that that was probably a good working number.

At around this time, planning was occurring for the visit of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Accessibilities Committee. I had won this consultation at a UUA General Assembly workshop on Accessibility in Long Beach, CA as part of an Accessibility Game Show activity (those years of Jeopardy and cryptography finally paid off!). Before the visit, we heard that one committee member used a wheelchair, and another a scooter, and we realized that, not only are our sanctuary and coffee hour not accessible, but even Hale Lounge does not have doors wide enough for wheelchairs (we had always assumed we had *one* accessible room!). We initially looked into renting a ramp for the sanctuary (which we could later buy and make permanent) and renting an accessible Port-a-Potty, but were wisely advised by the UUA Accessibilities Committee not to spend money without going through adequate process. They decided instead to have their able-bodied members do the walk-through and 11am Sunday service at UUCR, then to have all other meetings off-site with the *full* UUA committee. In addition, they would have another worship service on Sunday at 9am off-site, to be inclusive and supportive of the committee members in wheelchairs and scooters. We later found out that even the hotels that claimed to be wheelchair accessible were not *really* accessible, so plans had to change yet again.

For the third meeting of the UUCR Task Force, we had researched the cost of the permanent version of the ramp that we had considered renting, but decided against it for various reasons. The architect's study and earlier discussions had also considered but rejected the covered portico (from the Hale front door to the coat closet off the sanctuary), so we looked into a poured concrete version of a ramp to the sanctuary.

At this time, I called Wayne Clark, the UUA's church finance/capital campaign guru to see how feasible the cost of the full accessibility project was for a church of our size and situation.

Given our size of about 100 members, our Operating Budget of about \$155,000, our Endowment of about \$160,000, and the fact that we have no mortgage to pay off, Wayne indicated that this project is almost not large enough for a capital campaign. The rule of thumb is that a capital campaign should be for an amount 3 times annual giving, meaning pledges, plate, and auction for us, so ours would be close to this line. He said that if our best estimate was the original \$250,000, we could do a "Miracle Sunday" (one-day drive, with lots of preparation in advance). The fact is that Restoration hasn't had a major capital campaign for 25 years. If we were to have a capital campaign, we would need to first put together a 5 year Strategic Plan. We could even do an initial Miracle Sunday, then launch a capital campaign a couple of years later. After discussing all of this the Task Force decided the best thing for UUCR to do at that time was to put together a 5 year plan, and to work this full accessibility project into it. We also agreed that time was of the essence, however, and that **we would like to see the accessibility project completed soon**. This might require some creative blend of a mortgage (which would allow us to start construction quickly) and a capital campaign (which hopefully could completely pay off the mortgage in a few years, but even if it didn't fully cover it, the burden on the budget should be reasonable).

Thus **the Task Force recommendation for UUCR was to spend no money on accessibility right then, but to do what was necessary to organize the strategic planning process, and dive into it as a whole congregation as soon as possible**. As part of that, we planned to get bids for possible versions of the accessibility project at our current location, think about other possibilities (moving to a building at another location, building from scratch at a different location, etc.), perform demographic studies, and get help from the UUA and our Joseph Priestley District (JPD) for all of the pieces involved.

**When we met with the UUA Accessibilities Committee** on January 8, 2005 they supported us in this recommendation. They recommended *asking* our current members and friends what we can do to meet their immediate and longer term needs, and doing research on people with disabilities in the area (get to meet and know some people, what they would need, find ones inclined to be interested in UUism in general and us in particular, etc.). But they said the most important thing is to go through a thorough inclusive strategic planning process, come up with a plan, and then *enact* the plan without second-guessing or revisiting it in any major way for another 5 years. They also said that there were simple, free and/or inexpensive things we could do immediately to show concern about accessibility. These included making large-print orders of service, having a section of pews for people with hearing impairments (and possibly visual impairment) and considering using beeswax candles (for people with chemical sensitivities).

We did in fact do a strategic process called Future Search about a year later, and one goal coming out of that process was to become fully wheelchair accessible. At this point, Harald Grote and Larry Hain solicited bids to determine the feasibility and cost of a ramp to make the sanctuary wheelchair accessible, which was then not acted upon when a bid came in at around \$30,000. Larry Hain worked on modifying our bathrooms so that they were better for people with mobility impairments (making more space around the toilets, installing grab bars, etc.), but they still are not appropriate for people in wheelchairs (none of the doors are wide enough, for example).

In 2007, I solicited a bid from a neighbor of mine, Earl Ross, who is a contractor. He said he would be able to do a permanent concrete ramp, to the specifications Harald had put together, for \$10,000. So the Folk Factory donated \$1000, we used the \$8000 balance of Steve's 50/50 money, and supplemented these with some money from the Building & Grounds budget and special funds

to do the full ramp job, including fixing the front stairs, partly made possible because over a dozen UUCR members volunteered and provided their labor in doing the digging, cleaning, and planting of the grass. This has been our biggest contribution to accessibility at UUCR, and many church members and Folk Factory participants have expressed gratitude for it.

Since the ramp, Grace Sherer did a survey of the congregation for accessibility needs, and was able to get Pennsylvania Universalist Convention (PUC) grant money to provide large-print hymnals and other materials on request, listening devices, a highline toilet, lever handles for lavatory sinks, and pull doors for rest rooms, with the help of Larry Hain, Annabel Grote, and Harald Grote.

So, where are we now? The Multicultural/Anti-Oppression/Accessibility Ministry (now part of the Justice Council) and Mike Foy of the Building & Grounds Committee, in conversation with the Board, is now hoping to install the straight stair glide for as little as \$5500, as long as we can get the needed variances. We also hope to construct a wheelchair-accessible bathroom on the ground level of Hale Hall, either by combining the two bathrooms already there, or taking the one on the Duo Room side, and expanding into the corner of the Duo Room near the copier. Beyond that, the time is right to start thinking about a multi-year strategic plan that includes a specific, detailed plan to become fully wheelchair accessible, and start a Capital Campaign once we have that plan in place. We set this as a goal during the Future Search, and seem to have a consensus that we as a congregation want to do it. Last year at our strategic planning meetings, it became clear that the congregation wants to stay in our same space here at Stenton & Gorgas, but that we want to make it fully accessible, both for the sake of our *current* members and for potential *new* members.

*Let's do it!*