

# UUCJ's Social Justice History

By Kathleen McKenzie

I want to talk to you today about this church's Social Justice history . I want to speak, in particular, about Rev. Charles White McGehee--truly the founding minister of our congregation. While Anna and Duncan Fletcher started the Unitarian meetings in Jacksonville, it was Rev. Charles White McGehee who launched UUCJ into social justice work.

Recently my friend, Jim Crooks--history professor emeritus from UNF and author of several books on Jacksonville history--handed me a folder that Rev. McGehee had handed to him. The folder contained a letter from McGehee to Jim as well as information about what he and UUCJ had done to support the civil rights movement and other social justice work during Rev. McGehee's 16-year ministry at UUCJ.

REV. CHARLES WHITE MCGEHEE went to divinity school at age 40. He had previously been a journalist. He was the minister of UUCJ from 1960 to 1976. This church was built in 1966--at which time the McGehees moved from Riverside to Arlington.

When Rev. McGehee arrived in Jacksonville, he immediately became involved in the Civil Rights movement as one of the few white pastors to support the NAACP Council. McGehee said he was often the only white minister at many civil rights meetings.

## **His activities and contributions to the community and to civil rights were many:**

During his 16-year tenure in Jacksonville:

- He served on the Executive Board of the NAACP Council.
- He was active in the Urban League.
- He was the Southeastern Director of the UU Society for Social Action.
- President of the Jacksonville Human Relations Council
- On the Executive Board of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and edited their newsletter.
- He was a Member of Community Relations Committee
- He worked with congregants to establish a Head Start program in this church, serving Arlington & Southside neighborhoods, prioritizing children of single working mothers and single working fathers.
- He was a Founding board member of Tree Hill Preservation.

- A Founder and board member of the Clergy Consultation Service
  - He counseled women on abortion.
  - Counseled conscientious objectors to the Viet Nam war  
And led them to the Quakers if he thought they were sincere.
- He was president of the Northeast Florida Human Relations Council
- He was President of the Jacksonville Chapter of the United Nations Association, (which he said, strangely enough, brought more criticism and threats than anything else he did.)
- He protested the use of materials from the very conservative John Birch Society in High School Civics Classes because they attacked “certain cornerstones of American way of life.”
- He protested against the death penalty: McGehee said “Violence always breeds violence. The best deterrent to murder is reverence for life.”
- Rev. McGehee testified to the Florida State Senate on the Morality of Legal Abortions. He stated, “I think there should be no laws on this matter at all. The basic issue is the right of a human being to be wanted on this earth.”
- Commented in Jacksonville Journal newspaper on the Separation of Church and State, “Just as the state must not be dominated by a major religion, neither shall any individual be penalized because of his beliefs—including the right not to believe.”
- The Church –under McGehee’s leadership—held regular “Interpersonal Relations” Programs for the congregants. And Seminars on the Family taught by specialists that he brought in.
- Members followed Rev. McGehee’s lead, serving as president of the League of Women Voters, and the Fair Tax Association., and participating in demonstrations and marches for civil rights and anti- Vietnam-war.

**I want to tell you about Three Examples of Rev. McGehee's commitment to Civil Rights and social justice:**

On March 7, **1965**, in Selma, Alabama, demonstrators—led by civil rights activist John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (We older members remember SNCC and SCLC). The group planned to march the 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital.

Just as 600 peaceful civil rights demonstrators crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside Selma, they were ordered to disperse. Moments later, white state troopers and sheriff's deputies assaulted them with tear gas, bullwhips, and Billy clubs.

The day's events became known as "Bloody Sunday."

On the evening of March 7, Three Unitarian ministers, the Reverends Clark Olsen, Orloff Miller, and James Reeb, were attacked by white men with clubs on the sidewalk in Selma. Rev. James Reeb was killed.

The protest marches lasted three days.

Despite Rev. McGehee's disabilities from severe back problems that made walking difficult, he participated on the last two days (March 8 & 9) of the March on Selma.

Within days, the violence spurred demonstrations in 80 cities across the nation. On March 9, Martin Luther King, Jr. led more than 2,000 marchers to the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

### **In 1973 UUCJ formed Unicity, Inc. as the community action arm of the church.**

The congregation had been searching for a meaningful project to support Jacksonville and settled on aiding the efforts of Citizens Community Action District 6.

District 6 was the most polluted, dilapidated, and segregated (half white and half black) area of Jacksonville. Two members of our church, black attorney Isaiah Williams III and white volunteer Jane Staly, were already officers of CCAD6.

Rev. McGehee and Rev Theodore Lee, a black minister in District 6, exchanged pulpits during the beginning phase of the project. "There was a real honesty about it that led to the cooperation of the blacks involved and avoided any 'patronizing whites' attitude." Isaiah Williams and Rutledge Pearson of the NAACP began bringing the NAACP Youth Group to occasional services at our church.

But Unicity was more than just a means of focusing community interest on District 6.

The members immediately raised \$3000 for a down payment on an acre of land with a building, which Unicity took title of in September. Two "shell houses" were moved to the site in a complex designed by Unitarian Robert Broward—the architect of this church.

The Unicity efforts resulted in the creation of the Joseph Lee Youth Recreation Center with a daycare unit and a library for the promotion of black history.

**During the Vietnam War**, Rev. McGehee, some Lutheran ministers, and William Greenleaf of the Jacksonville Society of Friends (Quakers) formed one of the most active anti-war groups in Jacksonville. They called themselves Clergy and Laymen Concerned about the Viet Nam War.

This UU Church held a candlelight service for a Vietnam War Moratorium. McGehee read the name of every serviceman from the Jacksonville area who had died in the Vietnam War-- And a candle was lit for every name--as it was read.

The Social Concerns Committee prepared a resolution calling on our government to withdraw from Viet Nam.

About all this, Rev. McGehee said: **"This is just the beginning for us."**

**Our Church has continued the social justice ministry through its activities:**

- We have participated in various protests, memorials, letters to the editors of newspapers and letters to government officials.
- We Collected and delivered Books, magazines, dictionaries to Prisoners.
- We contribute food and money for Arlington Community Services
- We initiated and maintain the Arlington Community Garden
- Ours is a Green Sanctuary.
- We study and take actions on issues of Climate Change.
- We are a Welcoming Congregation—we embrace the LGBTQ community.
- We march in The Pride Parade
- And in the Martin Luther King Parade
- WE Support the UU Service Committee working around the world.
- And we strongly support ICARE—and have for 25 years!
- We understand that institutional racism exists. Combatting Institutional Racism is a primary reason that ICARE exists. Together we're working on policy changes that make institutions and society less racist—more equitable for vulnerable people in education and law enforcement.

**This is the story of our UUCJ's social justice origins.**

Our activities speak to our intentions and our desires to live in a more just and equitable world.