

ABOUT SANDRA OLSEN

The First Church of Christ in New Haven has seen twenty-one ministers come and go, and I am very proud and happy to be its twenty-second minister. I began my ministry here on September 1, 2005 after serving the First Church of Christ, Congregational in Middletown, CT for fourteen years as the associate pastor.

My home is still in Middletown, where I live with my husband, Donald Oliver, who is a professor of molecular biology at Wesleyan University. We have four grown children, two boys and two girls, who are now making their way in the world.

Before moving to Middletown in 1991, I lived in Stony Brook, Long Island for nine years, where I worked as a chaplain in various medical settings, and my husband was a professor in the Medical School at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. I also served a Unitarian Universalist Church on a part-time basis for seven years.

My growing up years were spent mainly in (suburban) Buffalo, New York, though I also lived in Jacksonville for three years during the turbulent civil rights years in the 1960's. The experience of being a "Yankee" in the midst of entrenched resistance to civil rights certainly made a deep impression on my young mind and spirit. I was sometimes viewed as an "enemy," an outsider, who was trying to impose a whole new set of rules on a culture not interested in changing. I did not understand why I was being personally blamed for this, but the experience was character building.

I grew up as a pretty liberal Presbyterian, and my childhood memories of church and Sunday school are positive ones. I was taught that God is love and God's love is for everyone, including people of other religions or no religion at all. God's love was big enough to hold everyone, I was assured, so it was quite a shock to see many "good" members of our Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida, totally opposed to integration and the passage of Civil Rights legislation. When I asked my parents why, their response was, "Change is painful. None of us likes to change."

I went off to the University of Chicago in the late 60's, and like many students of my generation, I was swept up in the protest against the Viet Nam War as well as the civil rights campaign and the women's movement. The assassination of Martin Luther King erupted in flaming riots as National Guard troops descended on our campus. The summer of 1968 brought the Democrats to Chicago for their convention with more protest and riots. Church and God seemed both remote and irrelevant, and I recognized with a pang of regret that I no longer believed in God.

After graduation from college I earned a Master's Degree in teaching, but after teaching for three years I decided it was not the job for me. Eventually I found my way into Boston University's School of Theology. I went not because I was deeply spiritual, but rather because I was curious. I had found my way back to church, but it was the Unitarian-Universalist tradition, where all your answers are questioned, including belief in God. Somewhere in college my belief in God had died, and I wanted to know if or how it was possible to THINK

about God. I wanted to know if it were possible to maintain intellectual rigor and honesty, while also embracing faith. Where else to go but to a school of theology? I was not disappointed. I loved my studies and the questions theology asks and the answers it struggles to offer. I was inspired by the theology of Paul Tillich and the life and thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted the Nazis and paid with his life. I loved the never ending quest to know and understand, and the deep need and yearning to relate that knowledge and understanding to faith and the actual conditions of life.

After graduation from Boston University, I was ordained into the Unitarian Universalist Association, though I was already beginning to consider returning to my Christian heritage. I moved with my family to Long Island in 1983 and served a church (part time) as well as worked in various hospital settings. I also pursued a Doctor of Ministry Degree at the Roman Catholic Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, New York. The sole Protestant in the program, I was challenged and stretched by not only my colleagues and professors, but also through my exposure to Catholic thinkers such as Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper and Bernard Lonergan.

While working as a chaplain in the midst of great suffering on a burn unit, a neo-natal intensive care unit and a neurosurgery unit, where the deepest questions about life, death, and hope are not theoretical but actual, I finally decided to transfer my ministerial standing into the United Church of Christ. In the context of so much suffering, the God who suffers and yet also loves and forgives was the God who captured both my heart and mind, the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

We human beings are all on a journey, and the paths before us are many and diverse. The Christian path has been the one I have chosen to walk, and I have found it leading to full and abundant life. But I also realize there are other paths, asking different questions, offering different answers. We need such diversity to challenge and enrich us and also remind us, "Not all who wander are lost." (Tolkien)

The great physicist, Albert Einstein once said, "Our situation on this earth seems strange. Every one of us appears here involuntarily without knowing exactly why. To me it is enough to wonder at the secrets."

I hope you will pay us a visit at First Church, located on new Haven's historic Green. Come, and wonder with us. With all life's struggles, hurts and sorrows, it is still a beautiful world. Come and give thanks to God with us.

Sandra Olsen