



# Congregation History

## Summary

**We** began as the *Blacksburg Unitarian Fellowship (BUF)* before changing our name to the *Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the New River Valley (UUFNRV)* following the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961. In 2003, we voted to recognize that we were no longer a Fellowship but a Congregation, and our name was changed to *Unitarian Universalist Congregation (UUC)*. After several years of being lay-led or having part-time ministers, we called our first full-time settled minister in 1999. Today we have over 200 members, a thriving Religious Education Program, a very active Social Action Program, are a *Welcoming Congregation* and hope soon be recognized as a *Green Sanctuary*.

The [history timeline](#) gives the dates and a few more details of the major events in our history. The following section is a brief narrative that provides some background about our history. We also have a chronological [list of presidents](#).

## BUF/UUCNRV/UUC Founding and Growth



Herschel Elarth

**I**n the fall of 1955, three recent arrivals to Blacksburg met to explore the possibility of establishing a Unitarian fellowship. They were W.E.C. Moore, a biologist, Herschel Elarth, a professor of architecture (picture to the right), and Wilhelmina Elarth, Herschel's wife and an art historian. Moore contacted the Unitarian Universalist Association home office on Beacon Street in Boston and, subsequently, Monroe Husbands, a Unitarian minister who specialized in getting fellowships started, visited Blacksburg. A group of about seven families applied for a charter, which was granted October 8, 1956. Meetings were held in various halls and churches. In a March 2012 [Stewardship testimonial](#), Mary Houska gave a summary of the early years. (MP3 file)

On April 16, 1967, members passed a resolution to purchase a house lot and construct a house (mortgage terms for a residential dwelling were much better). Elarth modified the stock plans for a ranch house with a full basement to make the house more suitable for the Fellowship's purposes.

The Fellowship's building was completed in December 1967. As the Congregation grew from 35 in 1973 to 50 in the early 80s, Elarth designed an expansion that doubled the size of the meeting room and added classroom space on the lower level.

In May, 1987, Elarth presented information to the Fellowship about the availability of land adjacent to the Meeting House, and the Fellowship purchased about 2.8 acres. The Fellowship voted to retain an architect to prepare preliminary plans in March 1990, and the building (now called Phase I) was completed in Spring 1992. In honor of Herschel's contributions, the meeting

hall in the new building bore his name.

About two years after we moved into the new building, we found we already needed more RE space, and Elarth Hall was not adequate for our services (even after going to two Sunday services). There was a problem of designing an expansion and maintaining the amount of green space and the increased number of parking spaces required by the town. As luck would have it, in March 2005 our neighbor, Dr. Walter Gross made his adjoining property available to us and we purchased it. (In 2003, the Fellowship changed its name to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation (UUC).

Because of the crowding of Elarth Hall and the need for more Religious Education space, the Board decided in 2004–2005 to undertake the building expansion. The final design focused on RE space, a larger sanctuary, new offices for staff, a larger kitchen, a view of the mountains and sustainable (environmental) design features. The old sanctuary, Elarth Hall, is now our fellowship hall. The completed building extension (Phase II) was dedicated on July 8, 2008.

Our beautiful sanctuary has hosted several concerts and gets high praise for both the acoustics — and the view. UUC members are reclaiming the wild flower garden, EarthSpirit Sisters built a labyrinth, members participate in a community garden, and a Memorial Garden and columbarium were completed in May 2011.



A Google Earth image from 2010 shows the Phase II building. The house to the left of the driveway is the original Meeting House. (The second house was built on land sold by the Fellowship when the land was bought for Phase I.) The circular area visible in the aerial photograph just beyond the building is the site of the Memorial Garden and columbarium, completed in May, 2011.