

Half a Century in the UU Wilderness

By: The Rev. Sir Edgar Peara

50 years ago, M/L ministerial candidates included such luminaries as David Bumbaugh, Ron Engle, Paul Beattie and Neil Shadle.

I had been a Registered Christian Science Practitioner in Chicago for eleven years. During the Korean War I had been a CS chaplain at US Naval Training Center, Great Lakes, IL.

I left CS because it was too rigid and close-ended. They wanted practitioners to only read and use the works of Mary Baker Eddy in their practice.

I felt the metaphysical therapy in New Thought had moved beyond CS in writers such as Ernest Holmes, Thomas Troward, the Filmores and others.

When I searched for another religious venue I was attracted to Unitarianism because it was advertising, "You are a Unitarian without knowing it, if you believe that truth unfolds forever."

Also, I liked and enjoyed the Unitarians I met in their churches. 50 years later, I like them even more.

I inquired about how to become a Unitarian minister, [The Unitarians had not united with the Universalists at that time.]

I reminded the Midwest Unitarian District executive that in the armed services chaplaincy persons from different religions shared the same status whether they were Unitarian, Presbyterian, Baptist ministers, or Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis or Christian Science Practitioners.

I contended that since, in military service a CS Practitioner and a Unitarian minister, have the same standing and do the same work, couldn't I just be accepted by the Unitarians and become one of their ministers?

"No," the Unitarian District official said, "To join our club you have to go through our initiation." That meant graduating from a Unitarian theological school, like Meadville/Lombard, as well as meeting the other requirements.

At first taking that academic plunge gave me pause. The qualifying professional ministry BM program was a four year degree program.

But when I attended a Unitarian inquiry meeting in Evanston, IL I was so inspired that I was motivated to do whatever was necessary to become a Unitarian minister.

And so, I took the plunge in spite of having a wife, two sons and a job then at the Chicago YMCA as an academic executive [like being a Superintendent of Schools].

I then applied to M/L, was accepted and given a full scholarship.

I quit my job and I moved my wife and sons, Chris and Jon to Woodlawn, and began the program. My third son, Tim, was born the first night of my classes at M/L, Oct. 1, 1960.

The Hutchins' U. of Chicago's policy of letting students advance as rapidly as they met degree requirements suited me. I accelerated and received my degree 20 months after I started. That was 50 years ago this month, June, 1962.

During that time M/L time, I also preached every Sunday, taught four courses a term in Chicago's YMCA night school and had a therapy practice

I loved being at M/L, thoroughly enjoyed Hyde Park and the U of Chicago. Friday evenings the student body would gather at Meadville house for a delicious meal and social party. We loved each other's company. My time at M/L was a joy.

And so, I began my UU ministry at linked congregations in Springfield and Chester Depot, Vermont. I spoke in Chester Depot at 9am and in Springfield at 11am. The "new" edifice in Springfield had been built in 1790! The stone church in Chester Depot was a gem.

My special interest in social action was not appreciated in that conservative climate.

When my first son, then six years old, told me his public school classes began with Bible reading and the Lord's Prayer, I objected to the teacher on grounds of separation of church and state. She sent me to the principal, who sent me to the Board of Education who sent me to the Vermont Board of Education who sent me to the Attorney General.

My objection was sustained. Vermont's beginning-of-the-day religious readings were then discontinued in ALL the state's public schools. I thought my congregations would be proud of me, but parishioners' coworkers in the area industries made them uncomfortable by chiding them about their irreligious minister.

When I lobbied against America's involvement in the Viet Nam War, I was accused of being unpatriotic.

My fourth son was born in Vermont, Feb 29, 1964. Six weeks later my sons lost their mother and I became, for six years, the single parent of four little boys.

I then accepted a call as the first minister of the new Lake Shore UU Congregation in Wilmette, IL. It was like going home for me.

At that time, 1965, I had heard of clergy based abortion services in the east.

My single parenting of my sons made me aware of the dedication, work, love and unselfishness that caring for children required. I felt strongly that no woman should ever have to be a parent unless she chose to do so.

When I attended the First National Conference on Abortion Laws I sought persons who might want Chicago to have a clergy volunteer abortion counseling service.

I met the Rev. Spencer Parsons, the Dean [chaplain] of Rockefeller Chapel at the U. of Chicago. He knew of illegal, but competent abortionists whose services he used in his ministry to coeds at the University.

I told him I would recruit clergy to serve, if he would supply the abortionists. Initially I got 16 ministers and 2 rabbis to become counselors to women seeking abortions. At first I was the only UU. Eventually we had 50 clergy counselors.

Illegal abortions in Illinois then called for a five year felony. The law never bothered us. Police would bring their wives and women friends to us.

For four years our Chicago Area Clergy Counseling Service for Problem [that is unwanted] Pregnancies provided tens of thousands of illegal, but safe abortions. I personally helped 700 women during those years. We had daily newspaper ads inviting women to use our services. My work was described in a NBC TV interview and in a Chicago Daily News Article.

When Rove v. Wade passed we turned our work over the Planned Parenthood.

At the Seattle, WA GA in 1970 I met Phyllis, an adorable lay delegate from the Omaha, NE UU Church. At the time we were each single parents of four kids apiece. We married a month later and now have ten grandchildren.

Phyllis and I had 41 wonderful years together until she died March 6th, last year. I've been alone since.

I have now flunked retirement twice.

I retired the first time 25 years ago, when I was 66. I had enough money then, for the rest of my life. While I never made much money as a minister, for me the stock market was like a money tree.

However I like to work, and when I was called to the Community UU Church of Park Forest, IL I served them ten more years. At the time of my second retirement, they named me their Minister Emeritus.

In Wilmette and Park Forest I was a Commissioner of Human Relations.

I was then called to our church in Auckland, New Zealand as an interim. What a paradise that place is. The Kiwi people are so good, kind, friendly, helpful – almost like being on another planet.

My hearing got so bad while I was there that I couldn't work well in a board or committee meeting, and so I'm now in my third retirement.

During my ministries I also taught as an adjunct teacher or lecturer in eight colleges and universities including M/I. My courses were in philosophy, sociology, psychology and religion.

Eleven years ago we moved to Eugene, OR, to be close to my fourth son. It's a blissful place with an ideal climate, matchless scenery, cultural advantages [home of the U. of Oregon] and friendly people who rival the goodness of the Kiwis. I have more friends here than anyplace I've ever lived.

During WWII I was a combat engineer officer in a unit that spearheaded invasions from the first one of the war in Algeria-Morocco, to Tunisia with Patton, D-Day to the end in Sicily and bloody Salerno in Italy,

I invaded Utah Beach in Normandy on the morning of THE D-Day and I was in France until we got to Aachen, Germany. Then we island hopping in the Pacific until the last deadliest campaign in Okinawa where one out of three Americans was a casualty. .

If the war had continued, our next invasion would have been the Tokyo plain in Japan. Instead we went to Korea to disarm the Japanese troops and help create a new government.

In more campaigns than any other American soldier, I never got a scratch. And I was always able to do whatever my duties required without ever harming the forces we faced.

The war made me a pacifist. I've been active in peace work for 47 years. I was a founder of the North Shore Peace Initiative in Chicago and Veterans for Peace in Oregon.

In July, 2010, President Sarkozy of France named me a Knight of the French Legion of Honor, France's highest decoration "for liberating my country." And so, I'm now the Rev. Sir Edgar Peara.

I will be 91 next month and continue to love working. I am grateful to fit and able to pursue volunteer jobs six or seven days a week

Such efforts reward me with the companionship of other volunteers, nice persons whom I as a live-alone-widower appreciate. The work gives me the exercise I need. And I appreciate adding a tiny bit to the human enterprise.

In the 11 years I've lived in Eugene, I've worked for 42 volunteer organizations. They include – planting trees, delivering Meals on Wheels, park and native plant nursery work, construction, feeding the poor, work for liberal politics, and many more. .

UU church work, of course. I do weddings and funerals and speak at the UU Church in Eugene and more.

This March 15th, the Red Cross Oregon Pacific Chapter gave me an "Everyday Hero" medal for being "Senior Compassion Hero."

I continue to have a counseling and therapy practice and write for a religious column ["Heart to Heart"] for the local daily paper. And there are persons I mentor who want to learn to do metaphysical therapy.

How can we as UU ministers be grateful enough? We have the unmatched opportunity to have intelligent, educated, social action oriented persons listen to what we feel will improve their lives and enrich the world. What could be more wonderful?

Treasure your ministry. Be grateful that M/L prepared you for it. Never stop endeavoring to learn more, share more and love more.

Aren't we a blessed crew? Indeed we are!