

**The Ministry of Lewis McGee**  
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**Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church**

In 1920 Unitarianism was a European religion that appealed primarily to educated people in the middle and upper-middle classes of the United States. The most famous Unitarian was William Howard Taft, a leader of the progressive conservative wing of the Republican Party in the early 20th century and the only person in the history of our country to serve both as President of the United States and later as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Taft was an active member of the Unitarian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Back then the Unitarians had a monthly magazine sent out from Boston with news about the Unitarian movement. They called it the *Christian Register*. One day in 1920 a 27-year-old minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Collingwood, Ohio, noticed the magazine. Years later he wrote:

*I found it necessary to supplement my meager mission salary by being a mail carrier for Uncle Sam. One day, in the mail on my desk for delivery, I saw a magazine entitled the Christian Register. The word Christian caught my attention and I opened it and glanced at the headings of the articles. I delayed delivering it for a couple days in order to read the contents. I liked it.*

*Then my good Methodist conscience took over and at the delivery I rang the doorbell and made my confession. The lady of the house, a good Unitarian, answered, "Why, help yourself, read it all you want. I invite you to visit our church down on Euclid Avenue." At the first opportunity I did visit the Sunday morning service. There was a quiet prevailing atmosphere. The hymns and readings were appealing. The sermon was inspiring. I don't remember a word that was said but I was very much impressed and had a strong feeling, "This is the kind of church I would like to minister to." I guess I was one of those Unitarians who did not know it.*

The young man's name was Lewis McGee. I want to tell you about him today because he was the first African American to be called to serve as the solo or senior minister of a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Lewis was born on November 11, 1893 in Scranton, Pennsylvania. His father, a former slave, was an African Methodist Episcopal minister. The AME Church was the first African-American religious denomination in the United States, founded in 1816. Lewis McGee followed in his father's footsteps, graduating from Payne Theological Seminary of Wilberforce University in Ohio, the first independent black college in the United States. He graduated in 1916 with a bachelor of divinity degree. The African Methodist Episcopal Church ordained McGee in 1917. He became a chaplain in the United States Army. After the end of World War I, Lewis served as minister in small AME churches in Ohio and West Virginia. Because these small churches paid almost nothing, McGee worked at other jobs such as delivering mail, which led him, as he noted,

to discover Unitarianism.

Lewis McGee's biographer, the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed (who was a student minister here in 1980), writes that McGee liked the dignity of the Unitarian service. As an AME minister he had never been comfortable appealing to his parishioners' emotions. He also found himself agreeing with the Unitarian theology, which was critical of traditional, dogmatic religion.

Yet he did not immediately resign as an AME pastor. It was not until 1927 that he journeyed to Chicago to talk with the Unitarian minister and religious humanist, Curtis Reese. McGee said to Reese, "I have read your sermons and religious humanism and I agree with them. I am a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church but I really want to be a Unitarian minister." Reese honestly said to McGee "If you want to become a Unitarian minister, you will have to bring your own church."

Lewis McGee remained in Chicago and became a social worker. While he was working, he took courses at the University of Chicago, Loyola University and Carthage College, where he graduated with a B.A. in social science in 1936. For two years he served an AME Church in Iowa and then returned to Chicago, where he worked in AME churches there and in Gary, Indiana. Still he was at heart a humanist, and in 1941 he began ten years of service on the board of the American Humanist Association. He may have kept this work on the board of the Humanists secret from his AME congregations.

In 1943 Rev. McGee reenlisted and became a chaplain in the U.S. Army. He served in Wales, England, France, Belgium and finally Germany, leaving the Army in the autumn of 1945. Serving as a military chaplain in the Second World War, McGee made a decision. He decided he had to assert himself and become the minister he really wanted to become so that he could say in the pulpit what he really believed and not what was acceptable to his traditional Christian congregations.

When he returned to the United States in the autumn of 1945, he married Marcella Walker, a Chicago librarian. It was the second marriage for both. In September of 1946, at the age of 53, he entered Meadville Theological School in Chicago to prepare himself to become a Unitarian minister. The white male Unitarian ministers again warned him that they did not think there was much opportunity for a Negro minister in Unitarianism. The president of Meadville told him that because of his age and race, the prospects of his finding a church would be very slight, but perhaps, after graduation, they could secure him a position as an assistant or associate in a large urban church.

Lewis and Marcella decided to found their own African-American Unitarian congregation in Chicago. They talked to their African-American friends, put together a mailing list and started to send out announcements of meetings. With a core group of about 20 persons, the new congregation began. Marcella's family was well established in Chicago. Her family joined the church. Marcella also had contacts through her job as a librarian and at a branch of the public library of Chicago. Several people from the library were among the early members. They in turn reached out, visiting other liberal-minded African Americans and inviting them to join.

By 1948, 60 years ago, 50 persons had pledged to become members of the Free Religious Fellowship. On April 25, 1948, the American Unitarian Association officially recognized the church. On June 13, 1948, the members of the church installed Lewis McGee as their minister. He was 66 years old.

Lewis's children from his first marriage were grown and on their own, as was Marcella's daughter Joan. Marcella's income as a librarian enabled Lewis and Marcella to survive financially. News articles about the Free Religious Fellowship appeared in the major African-American newspaper *The Chicago Defender* and in *The Chicago Sun-Times*. Meeting in rented space, the congregation grew to 98 adult members and 25 children.

Lewis tried to attract people of all races and economic backgrounds, but most of the new church's members had attended college and a significant number had attended graduate school. Most had left the AME church when science raised issues the church could not answer. These people formed an African American middle class, and Unitarianism attracted them. They welcomed the religious humanism of Lewis McGee's sermons. When it came to social action, McGee was a member of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

His sermons were on the philosophy of humanism. Lewis's preaching style was reasoned, intellectual and restrained. There was no shouting. One Sunday in 1953 McGee preached:

*Unitarians believe in individual freedom of mind, heart and conscience. We believe in the supreme value of the human person. We believe in the use of reason in religion. . . . We believe in the human capacity to solve individual and social problems and thus make progress. We believe in a continuing search for truth and hence that life is an adventurous quest. We believe in the scientific method as valid in ascertaining factual knowledge. We believe in democratic process in our human relations. We believe in ethical conduct.*

This was a humanist message that no other African American minister in Chicago was preaching.

In 1953, Lewis, at the age of 60, left the church he and Marcella had founded so that he could accept a better-paying position in Yellow Springs, Ohio, as the administrative assistant at the American Humanist Association.

At this point, although African American Unitarian ministers had started churches like the Free Religious Fellowship in Chicago, and although churches had called clergy of color to serve as assistant and associate ministers, no church had called a Unitarian minister of African descent to serve as the solo minister or the senior minister of a Unitarian congregation. The Unitarian Church in Flint, Michigan, came close to being the first in 1956, when it invited Lewis to be the candidate for its position. However, when the congregation voted, Lewis did not receive the two-thirds vote necessary for a call.

Unable to find a church of his own, in 1958 Lewis accepted a call to be the associate minister of

the First Unitarian Church in Los Angeles. Finally, in 1961, at the age of 68, Lewis McGee became the first African American to be called to serve as the solo minister of a white Unitarian Church. The members of the Chico, California Unitarian Fellowship voted to call him to be their minister. Chico is about 90 miles north of Sacramento, and has about 100 members in its Unitarian Universalist congregation. 1961 was also the year the Unitarians and Universalists merged to form one denomination.

After a year at Chico, Lewis served for a year at the Anaheim Unitarian Church, for two years at the Universalist Church in Pasadena, and a year at the Humboldt Unitarian Fellowship in Bayside, California, about 300 miles north of San Francisco. In 1965 he joined with hundreds of Unitarian Universalists in Selma, Alabama, to march for voting rights. In 1966 he retired from the ministry at the age of 73..

Lewis and Marcella moved to Maryland. One of Lewis's children from his first marriage and Marcella's daughter from her first marriage lived in this area. Lewis and Marcella became active in Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church. Lewis McGee died in 1979 when he was 85, but Marcella continued to come to church every Sunday, often with her daughter, Joan Harris.

When I arrived to serve as one of this church's ministers in 1993, I had several wonderful conversations with Marcella about her life. Although she was disappointed that there were not more people of color in our congregations, she was deeply committed to Unitarian Universalism. I felt deeply honored to have her as a member of our congregation.

Marcella always sat in the same place, on the west side of this room near the windows and about five rows back from the front. Toward the end of her life she came with a walker. Her hearing became weaker but her voice remained strong. When we did unison readings Marcella would often be one or two words behind the rest of the congregation, so that the congregation would finish and then loud and clear, Marcella would finish saying the last two words as her own solo. For me this was part of the liturgy of this church, the congregation saying the words together and then Marcella finishing at her own pace. I liked her slow, steady voice and I still miss it. She died in 1997 and I joined with two other ministers in celebrating her life in a memorial service for her at Cedar Lane. Her daughter Joan Harris moved to Boston in 1998 and died in 2006.

When Lewis McGee became a Unitarian minister 60 years ago, he was only one of two people of color in our ministry. Today there are more than 50 ministers of color in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association. We are making slow progress. Now at 25 Beacon Street, the headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston, the office where the president works stretches across the front of the building. The president's office has a fireplace, wood paneling, a chandelier, antique furniture, and portraits of important Unitarian and Universalist forbears. One portrait is of an African American face. Directly opposite the president's desk hangs the photograph of the Rev. Lewis McGee. When the UUA president holds meetings around the big conference table in his office, the photograph of Lewis McGee watches over the gatherings, reminding the leaders of our movement of our heritage.

And here in Bethesda each Sunday when I look out into this congregation, I remember Marcella.

I try to continue the heritage that she and Lewis handed down to us. My memory of her reminds me to treat every human being with worth and dignity.

Source: Morrison-Reed, Mark, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1980, 1984.