

Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of our First Parish Women's Alliance

May 19, 2019

Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris, Interim Minister

The First Parish Women's Alliance is the oldest organized group in First Parish. Established in 1919, the Alliance gathered for the purposes of enriching our religious life, strengthening our church, supporting community projects, providing enlightening programs and furthering the purposes of the UU Women's Federation of which the Alliance is a member. Over decades, they lived up to those intentions.

On Easter Sunday April 4, 1920 the First Parish meetinghouse was destroyed by fire. The women of the newly formed Alliance got to work. With their fundraising, they helped rebuild the Meetinghouse, this place we call home.

In 1934 the Alliance introduced the Christmas Candlelight Service, a tradition that continues to be celebrated here.

The cushions in our pews are thanks to the Alliance.

Funding, either partial or full, has made so many things possible including renovation of the Parish Hall kitchen, the entryway to Scott Hall, the Huntley Room and the kitchenette near it, and the Memorial Room. Recently, the Alliance funded a technology upgrade with a new projection screen soon to be installed in Scott Hall.

Over the years the work of the Alliance in the larger community has included support for local hospitals, the Red Cross, support for children living with diabetes through the Clara Barton Camp, support for children in Malawi who were orphaned by AIDS through the Children's Village.

And over the years the Alliance has been part of various efforts to safeguard and secure the rights of women.

I invite all the Alliance women present to be recognized. Please stand, wave. . . let us know you are here.

Each Sunday as we say the words of our affirmation we remind ourselves that service is our prayer. . . for 100 years- so far - the First Parish Women's Alliance lives that prayer. With gratitude we honor and celebrate you!

Reading from the Report of the Alliance April 14, 1944 prepared by Alliance President Mary D. Davenport

President Davenport began her report: "There are two sides to this work of the Alliance; one the serious religious side that cannot be reduced to statistics, the other the practical make-money side. That we cannot report on the first does not deny its' existence. If we manage at times to get fun out of the make money side, it is all to the good. . . ."

The report continues with a brief accounting for money raised and how it was used, tells of the sumptuous fare provided by the Program Committee (not food but speakers on various subjects), speaks of the Work Committee sewing for the hospital and making dresses for Russian Relief, acknowledges guests hosted at their gatherings and gatherings Alliance members attended, mentions connections with the Alliance of New England, and, includes a note acknowledging that the Alliance furnished a suite in the Nurses Building at the Harvey Cushing Memorial Hospital.

The report concludes, "We are a loyal group, and you may be assured that at all times both as an Association and as individuals, we will do our best to further the interests of First Parish."

Reflection

In the First Parish archives, there are a number of small notebooks with pages of neatly handwritten numbers, accounting for funds raised and funds spent. There are handwritten annual reports to the congregation, offering clues to a larger story, a deeper commitment, and a sustaining community of women.

In one of the notebooks among the reports was the annual report written by Women's Alliance President Mary Davenport in April 1944. The opening paragraph includes mention of what she calls the two sides of the Alliance: the serious religious side and the practical make-money side. And she comments, "That we cannot report on the first does not deny its' existence. If we manage at times to get fun out of the make money side, it is all to the good. . . ."

On the practical make money side, the archives tell of careful and thorough accounting, with the Alliance treasurer noting the source, amount and purpose of income as well as expenses related to events and projects including donations.

As I read and read again that 1944 report, I began to wonder if it really was the case that the serious religious side of the Alliance was not included in it. I tried reading between the lines. Suppose that is where a few bits about the "serious religious side" might be found. If Alliance President Davenport left something there, what might it be?

Between the lines, there are our foremothers whose sense of community and commitment to organize led to the "official creation" of this group in 1919. There are our foremothers who raised funds and help raise a new Meetinghouse. And there are our foremothers who, over months and years prepared meals, baked delicious goodies of all kinds, crafted items, and hosted receptions after memorial services and for special occasions. Our foremothers are remembered, their lives and work present in the accounting and the reports.

Generation after generation, and here and now women of the Alliance follow in these footsteps, continue these traditions, adapt to changing needs and times.

Between the lines there is a story about the serious religious side of the Women's Alliance. It speaks of being selfless and selfish (in the best sense of that word). What is recorded, remembered,

shared is done for the community and for "me." When it comes to church, what is done for the wellbeing of another is also done for one's own wellbeing. Ours is a single garment of destiny.

It is true - the serious religious side cannot be reduced to statistics. Nor can it be adequately summed up in a report. And the details, all of them, including the numbers, tell stories of faith and people who lived it.

It was true then. It is true now. Each generation has generations of foremothers who made/make it possible for us to gather here; women whose lives teach compassion, generosity, perseverance, satisfaction, hopefulness, endurance. . . .

If Mary Davenport had found a way to report on the statistics of the serious religious side perhaps she would have listed the names of her 73 companion women who were Alliance members in 1944. Perhaps she would have elaborated on her list and recounted – even briefly - a few stories. . . about the food they shared, what made them laugh and cry, what new ideas challenged them, what sorrow and what questions left them bereft or bewildered, what ah-ha moments came to them.

As I read between the lines, a story is told about how the Alliance lived and lives, lives today, the words of our affirmation – service is our prayer. More still, a story is told of living in love that is, as we say each Sunday, the doctrine of this church.

Mary Davenport's report ends - We are a loyal group, and you may be assured that at all times both as an Association and as individuals, we will do our best to further the interests of First Parish."

Giving shape to our faith. Making meaning of our lives. Changing our world. Loyalty to the doctrine of love and the prayer of service. Assured. At all times. May it be so for us all.