

## Did You Know?

# The Development of Unity Worldwide Ministries

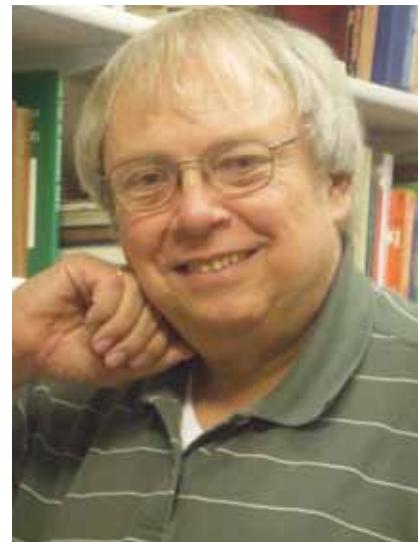
by Rev. Tom Thorpe, [thorpetf@unityworldhq.org](mailto:thorpetf@unityworldhq.org)

Development of a worldwide network of ministries was not part of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore's initial vision for Unity. The Fillmores believed that mainstream churches would provide space where Unity teachings could be presented and discussed. This, of course, did not happen. Almost from the earliest days of our Unity movement, students of Unity began forming groups that eventually became known as "Unity centers." Eight years before Unity School of Christianity was incorporated, the first Unity ordinations were conferred by the Unity Society of Practical Christianity on August 31, 1906. Those first ordinations were in fulfillment of the Society's mission to "send forth representatives trained in the work." (Vahle, 297) The Society's president explained a vision of not only providing education for Unity leaders at its Kansas City headquarters, but also of providing lecturers and teachers to help emerging centers become more firmly established. By 1909, the Unity Society for Practical Christianity was actively soliciting funds to endow the education of teachers in Kansas City.

By 1919, Unity School of Christianity (incorporated in 1914) had organized the Field Department to support the growing number of Unity centers and leaders. The Field Department's stated purpose was to "encourage cooperation, harmony, and constructive methods in the advancement of Truth." (Vahle, 315) Historian and biographer Neal Vahle explains that the Field Department provided guidelines for centers and churches, facilitated the development of "study classes" in local communities, published a newsletter and a directory of centers, provided lecturers and consultant services to centers, organized an annual conference each summer at Unity headquarters, and later participated with the Unity Training School in licensing and ordaining teachers and ministers.

In 1925, the Field Department established the Unity Annual Conference, an organization of Unity center leaders. By 1934, the Unity Annual Conference had established a code of ethics, and was working to raise the standards of performance for both centers and leaders. In 1946, the Annual Conference became the Unity Ministers Association and continued its work of maintaining and raising standards of practice among Unity ministers and teachers. Unity School endorsed and supported the work of the Unity centers and invited readers of *Unity Magazine* to participate in the centers' activities.

Late in 1965, when the number of Unity centers had grown beyond 200 and the task of supporting the centers was increasing in complexity, Charles R. Fillmore, grandson

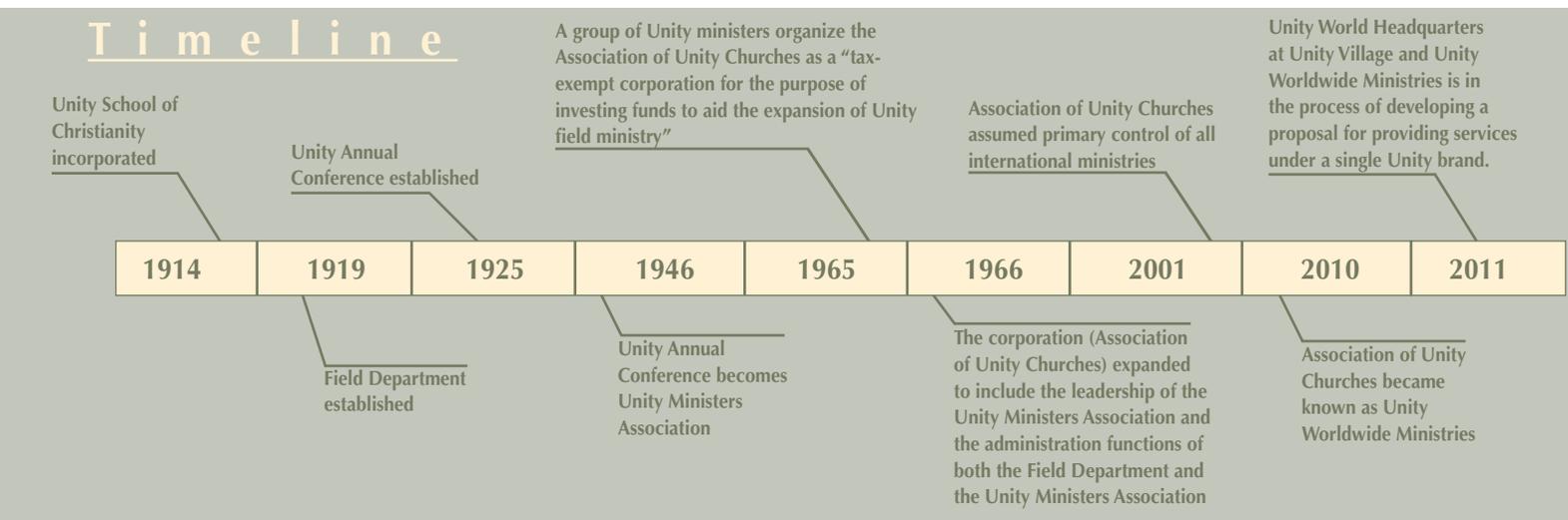


of Unity’s founders and then executive vice-president, issued Unity School Bulletin #4. Bulletin #4 outlined a plan for transferring authority and responsibility for overseeing the functions of field ministries, including the licensing of ministers and teachers and the ordination and placement of ministers. According to Vahle, Charles R. Fillmore explained, “Unity School as a ‘non-sectarian-based spiritual education institute’ was not the appropriate institution for administering an organization of local churches.” (Vahle, 348) Many today agree that Unity Worldwide Ministries and Unity School (now known as Unity World Headquarters at Unity Village) serve two different constituencies with differing and not always compatible needs.

In 1964, a group of Unity ministers had organized a “tax-exempt corporation for the purpose of investing funds to aid the expansion of Unity field ministry.” (Vahle, 350) That corporation, named the Association of Unity Churches, was expanded by a vote of its board to include the leadership of the Unity Ministers Association as well as the administrative functions of both the Unity School Field Department and the Unity Ministers Association. The reorganized Association of Unity Churches began operating on July 22, 1966.

Not all Unity leaders welcomed the Association of Unity Churches at first. Association former President and CEO Glenn Mosley observed that “the School’s decision created a lot of shock and controversy, and not all of the responses were of a positive nature.” (Mosley and Dunlap, 20) Although most centers did join the association when it began operating, it was not until the 1990s that the last holdout ministry became affiliated. By the end of the 1990s, our Association of Unity Churches included more than 1,000 ministries, several hundred of them outside North America. It was estimated that Unity ministries served about 170,000 congregants at that time.

Ongoing issues facing the association (now known as Unity Worldwide Ministries) have included the fact that too few of the people served by Unity Worldwide Ministries are aware that it exists as an entity separate from Unity School. This lack of name recognition has made attracting sufficient funds to carry on its work somewhat challenging. In the twenty-first century, support from several major funding sources has been reduced, and efforts to broaden the base of donors have not yet compensated for



the reduction. Efforts of an Association of Unity Churches Development Department, first organized in 1990, were met with ambivalence from the organization's leadership.

Establishing and maintaining a positive, productive relationship with Unity School has not always been easy. In 1979, a major controversy developed when Unity School proposed raising the rent paid by the association to more nearly reflect the cost of providing office and storage space. The association's board, in response, "recommended that the activities of Unity School and the association be brought together under the umbrella of an organization to be called 'Unity International.'" (Mosley and Dunlap, 87) The difference in size and assets between the two organizations, as well as the manner in which the proposal was presented to Unity School's leadership, did not draw a positive response to the proposal from Unity School's leadership. Former CEO Glenn Mosley observed, "Thank God, through the sincere and dedicated efforts of several of our Unity movement's advocates, a conflict that could have resulted in a split in the Unity movement was resolved." (Mosley and Dunlap, 88).

In June 1996, Systems Analyst Dr. David Renz reviewed the association's programs and procedures, and presented a report to the association's board of trustees. The Renz report expressed the view that the association was "on the threshold of the next generation of development," and recommended the development of a new strategic plan. Following the Renz report, a transition team developed a Future Search project that provided a vision for our association's continued growth in the twenty-first century.

Although ministers from outside North America were permitted to vote at annual conferences since at least 1978, it was not until January 9, 2001, that the association assumed primary responsibility for all international ministries through what was to become its Worldwide Services Department. Providing effective guidelines for international ministerial education and credentialing presents an ongoing challenge. Developing a worldwide organization of ministries, ministers, and other leaders that is enthusiastically supported by and truly responsive to the needs of its constituents has been compared with attempting to herd cats!

When member ministries were first asked, at the 2005 Unity People's Convention, to approve discussions about a possible merger of Unity School and the Association of Unity Churches, the vote was overwhelmingly negative. Six years later, a similar proposal received an overwhelmingly positive response. The boards of both organizations have asked their executive teams to develop a proposal for providing services under a single Unity brand.

The Unity website includes this inspiring statement: "In Unity, we feel a sacred responsibility, individually and collectively, to make a positive difference through personal example and active service in our churches, our communities and our world." This is an exciting time for all of us in Unity as each of us determines and acts on our commitment to this vision.

Tom Thorpe, an ordained Unity minister, is now serving as faculty member, with a primary emphasis on Unity Institute's Continuing Education Program.

[Access the current and past issues of \*Contact\* magazine.](#)

## Resources

Vahle, Neal. *The Unity Movement: Its Evolution and Spiritual Teaching*. Templeton Foundation Press, Radnor, PA 2002

Mosley, Glenn R. and Dunlap, Rebekah A. *Association of Unity Churches International: Its Beginning, Its Evolution, Its Vision for Worldwide Service*. Association of Unity Churches, 2006

### Editor's Note:

See page 35 for updated information on integration.