

## **Out of the Ashes**

*by Rev. Jim Bridges*

*UU Congregation at Rock Tavern*

It was around 5:40 a.m. on the morning of September 12 when I was awakened in the darkness by the telephone's incessant ringing. I fumbled around until I could find it, and then I heard "This is American Alarm Company. The smoke alarm is sounding in your church building. I have called the fire department." I replied that I would be out there in 10 to 15 minutes. On the way there I wondered if this was another false alarm, perhaps triggered by the woman who uses the meetinghouse for a preschool. Burnt toast was the cause of the last false alarm in the early morning.

As I pulled in the driveway, I saw the fire truck one driveway over trying to turn around. I recall hoping that they would see my car racing up our driveway – cluing them into where they should go. Approaching the top of the hill, I saw what looked like a few patches of fog, which in actuality were patches of light blue smoke. Exiting my car, I could smell a light odor of something smoldering. I decided against entering the building, not knowing what I would find nor how intense the smoke might be. The fire truck arrived; the driver radioed back to the station that it was a fully engaged fire; and then we waited for what seemed a terribly long time before a tanker arrived with water.

The light blue smoke rather quickly transformed itself into thick, billowing clouds of black smoke. Then, after I heard a pop and breaking glass, the sanctuary began emanating a bright red glow through its front windows. In short order these large windows also shattered, and flames began licking up to the crest of the building. They slowly worked their way back to the other end of the building. Water that was now being poured onto the flames seemed to have little effect. I asked one of the police officers if I could use his cell phone – since I had failed to bring mine along with me – and I called my wife, Athena, telling her the bad news and asking if she could bring both my Palm and cell phone out to the meetinghouse. Once she arrived around 8 a.m., I made a few more telephone calls, to let the president of the congregation know the bad news, to let the Northern Area Council ministers know that I would not be attending their meeting that morning in Danbury, etc. Around 11 a.m., when the fire was extinguished, we drove home.

For the next two or three days, I was inundated with telephone calls, averaging one or two every five minutes, making it difficult to complete the telephone calls we had to make – to change the telephone location, to forward the mail, and a host of other details that needed immediate attention.

Now, three weeks later, the UU Congregation at Rock Tavern is starting the long, gradual process of recovery from the tragic fire that completely destroyed its meeting house. The Board of Trustees has had several emergency meetings and appointed ad hoc committees to tackle the more immediate needs. As of October 3, the fire remains under investigation and no determination has been made to its cause. Consequently, the

structure has not yet been released to us for demolition, and neither have we received any insurance monies.

We have been blessed by the community response. We received extensive local news coverage lasting for about a week, and we even made the local television news programs once. Coverage has been positive, with one weekly paper writing a very positive editorial on us just this past week. Several newspapers have indicated that we are accepting donations towards a fire recovery fund.

Five or six Christian churches offered us shared use of their sanctuaries and related facilities, along with both the Middletown and Poughkeepsie UU congregations. We will be meeting several weeks at the local United Church of Christ and then switch over to a better configured space at a local Episcopalian church. Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches also offered space, along with several fire department companies. We have also been truly blessed to receive large donations from at least four or five Metro NY District congregations, who gave us their Sunday offerings. We also have received significant cash contributions from two local Catholic churches in Newburgh through their priests. St. Joseph's Catholic School in New Windsor donated a number of children's story books for our RE program. The Metro NY District's RE library has offered use of its curricula for our teachers until ours can be replaced.

Donations from people connected to our meetinghouse in some way, and from people with no apparent connection to us whatsoever, have been arriving in the mail. Several fundraisers are in the process of being set up – one by musicians who have performed over the years in our meetinghouse, to be held in the Poughkeepsie UU Fellowship's meeting space. We have also heard rumors of a Methodist church in a nearby town doing a fundraiser for us.

I personally have been touched by the number of ministers who have sent books to me to help replace my professional library which was lost in the fire. The NJ cluster of ministers sent me a significant financial contribution to aid in the library's replacement. I have also received books from Metro NY District clergy as well as clergy from Oregon, Maine, and Vermont. The upside to all of this is that many of these books are new to me, having not been in my original library. That means more reading awaits me in the future, broadening my understanding and knowledge!

The congregation so far has been strengthened by the tragedy. Five people have requested membership in the congregation since the fire. My hope for the future is that the congregation reassesses its mission, decides what it wants to be involved in for the future, and then decides to build a space that fits its needs. In so doing, we will become a more vital and significant presence in our small part of the world.

If there's anything I have learned from this, it's that nothing can break our spirit. Out of the ashes arise hope and rebirth.

*[Editor's Note: If you would like to make a donation to the congregation, send your donation to: Glenn Davies, 44 Hudson Terrace, Marlboro NY 12542.]*