

Report from the Founding Director

The Fire, Its Aftermath, and Our Plan to Move Back In

Rev. Allison Stokes, Ph.D.,
June 15, 2010

For leaders of the Women's Interfaith Institute, 2009 opened with a great deal of promise. The renovation of our Great Hall (the former sanctuary), made possible by a matching grant from the Main Street program, was almost complete. In December 2008, during the annual "It's A Wonderful Life Weekend" in Seneca Falls, many people, young and old, had come into the building to walk the labyrinth we had temporarily installed for the occasion. (This was an enormous canvas painted with the labyrinth that is in Chartres Cathedral. Because our pews had been removed for the Great Hall's renovation, the space was open and usable for this purpose.) Visitors that December weekend were deeply impressed by the beauty of the Great Hall. We had worked closely with a preservation architect, making choices about paint color, lighting fixtures, etc. that would be in keeping with the historic structure (built in 1871). At the turn of the year we were waiting only for the installation of the eight new chandeliers, on order, and insulation to be blown in above the ceiling for the renovation to be complete. With the improvements our optimism about the Institute's future growth and development was great. We knew that our success with this renovation project would help win us new historic preservation grants.

In late February, early March, a company installed the ceiling insulation (an important heat saving measure) and in early March our electrician completed wiring and hanging of the chandeliers. Tragically, at about 9:15 on Thursday evening, March 5th neighbors spotted smoke coming from the roof, and called 911. Within minutes, flames were seen coming from the building. Just as quickly firefighters from nine companies in the area arrived to battle the blaze. Through their skill and daring they managed to save our historic building. One of the volunteers at the scene that night was my next-door neighbor Dan. He confessed to me later that he had helped chop holes in our new roof (barely five years old) and so felt partly responsible for the enormous amount of water damage the building sustained. Dan also reported that he was astonished that they had been able to save a structure that old; rarely, he said, are they so lucky.

Dealing with the fire's aftermath occupied us for the remainder of 2009. It was both daunting and time consuming. In this report I will report about the cause of the fire, the mold that then enveloped the building, the three month long cleanup, the insurance claim and settlement, and the outpouring of concern and volunteer help from near and far.

The Fire and Its Cause

The destruction that greeted us on the morning of Friday, March 6th was absolutely crushing. Words cannot adequately describe it. Two of our board members had been on the scene the night before: Mayor Diana Smith and former President, Rev. Marilyn Foster. Diana used her influence to protect and remove our most precious treasures—including the Elizabeth Cady Stanton pulpit, the tapestry of Stanton and T'ahirih, a narrative quilt and other items. The next day Marilyn and current board President, Sylvia Strobel, entered the Great Hall and in a

process of sleuthing found buried under the debris our Sojourner Truth and the Tea Party quilts, both gifts from generous supporters. They hauled these valuable items outside— dirty and wet, but otherwise unharmed. They have since been cleaned and restored by a company that specializes in this work.

It was quickly apparent to inspectors that the cause of the fire was not arson, nor neglect (a candle left burning or teapot left on, for example). Because it began above the ceiling in the newly restored Great Hall—a burned beam and rafters were apparent— clearly the cause was electrical. The damage from the fire itself was confined almost entirely to the roof structure. The damage to the rooms and contents below was water damage from fire hoses. Witnesses that night exclaimed about the rivers of water pouring from the front entry doors, and there was at least a foot of water in the basement, where most of our books and files were located. Within the week we had arranged to have the huge roof covered in a tarp to keep out the rain.

Our insurance company hired an independent inspector to try to determine the exact cause and responsibility. To make a long story short, he was ultimately able to say that the fire started from old wiring that was live, but he was unable to hold anyone accountable because three different parties were involved in the renovation work—the electrician we hired to do the new electrical work, the contractor who did the ceiling drywall and painting, and the subcontractor who put in the insulation. The result was that the only insurance the Institute had to cover the loss is what we carried on the building, and (separately) on its contents. Unfortunately, this insurance, which cost us dearly in yearly premiums, was not sufficient for the considerable work that now must be done to restore the building.

Because the inspector did not want to disturb possible evidence until all parties involved had a chance to see and photograph the situation, the clean up did not begin until 5 weeks after the fire. In the meanwhile mold had set in, a second tragedy. Protected by special suits and respirators, professionals came in and removed soggy rugs from throughout the building, knocked out water soaked dividing walls made of flimsy wallboard, and took out sagging, soggy ceilings. The result is that the building now looks much more like it did originally, more open and with hardwood floors throughout the first and second floors exposed. This is what we had always wanted to do...but not THIS way!

Insurance Claim

The Building: Much of the old roof structure needed to be removed and replaced before a new roof could be installed. Because this would cost far more than the building was insured for, this part of our claim was easily established. (During the fall, before the snow flew, our contractor did enough roof work to secure the building. More remains to be done.)

The Contents: Establishing that our lost possessions were worth what they were insured for was more difficult. This was because our most valuable holdings were/are the library collections. Ninety boxes of wet and moldy books had to be discarded. One hundred and eighty four boxes were packed up and moved to a nearby storage area, provided to us free of charge by a Seneca Falls businessman. We calculated that there were about 36 books in each box, meaning

that our entire collection came to almost 9,000 volumes before the fire. Putting a price on the lost books took months of time and effort. Putting a price on lost files and records was even harder. Not until August were we able to submit the lost contents claim, which was quickly settled.

Help Offered

After the fire, many people came forward to offer assistance; however, for a while there was little anyone could do because the building was too dangerous to enter. (It is still padlocked.) Although there are many to be mentioned, I name two people and a company whose help we especially depended upon. Bill Squires, a structural engineer volunteered his time and skill to take measurements, make drawings, determine the extent of the damage to the roof structure, and make specific recommendations about how to proceed. On the basis of Bill's work, estimates were made. Dana Allen, owner of Academy Square (the former high school), provided storage space for the books that were saved. And a "roll-off" for collecting debris was provided free of charge by Seneca Meadows, and the company also waived disposal fees at their landfill. This saved us a great deal of money.

Funding an Executive Director

I learned during this exhausting experience that dealing with the aftermath of a fire can easily be a full-time job. Happily, our Board President Sylvia Strobel offered to take over at the Institute as part-time Executive Director, a position I had long hoped could be funded. This was now made possible by setting aside some insurance monies. At an historic board meeting in the United Methodist parsonage, Rev. Marilyn Foster's home, on Thursday, June 4th, thirteen weeks to the day after the fire, we voted Sylvia Strobel in as Executive Director. Marilyn agreed to take up, again, the role of President. I would continue on the board as Founding Director, supporting Sylvia and Marilyn in every possible way.

At the end of June Sylvia will be leaving the Institute to take a full time position in Sedona, Arizona. She has accomplished much during the past year. We were blessed to have Sylvia at the helm. Her skilled leadership carried us through a difficult and stressful time, and prepared us to meet the future. We wish her well in her new venture.

Immediate Plans

Our short-term goal is regaining the use of our historic home. With the generous help of Friends of the Institute, in a Move Back In campaign, we hope to do what is necessary to obtain a Certificate of Occupancy by October 31st. We have closed off the Great Hall, but intend to restore meeting space in the north end of the building. Next we plan to do necessary masonry work on the tower. Long term, probably several years down the road, we plan to restore the Great Hall to its original beauty and usefulness.

In the meanwhile we are offering limited programming offsite. The Women's Interfaith Institute will offer a keynote slide lecture during Seneca Falls' Convention Days on Friday evening July 16th, using the Episcopal Church several blocks away as a venue. And we will

offer a program on Sunday afternoon October 10th as part of Seneca Falls Dialogue 2010. (For more information see News on the website.) And for 10 days in early June the Institute participated in the Art of Our Faiths exhibit at the First Congregational Church in Canandaigua. We had five pieces of our remarkable art (including two narratives quilts by Alice Gant of Trumansburg) in the exhibit.

The Women's Interfaith Institute in the Berkshires, a sister organization and the original group, continues to be a vital organization. They offer monthly potluck dinners, programs and discussions at their home base in the Parish House of the Church on the Hill in Lenox.

I continue to promote the Institute through my scholarship on Women in American Religious History. In November I gave a PowerPoint presentation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, and in December I gave this at the 5th Parliament of World Religions' meeting in Melbourne, Australia. The topic of my talk was "Drawing Inspiration from Our Foremothers: Women's Voices at the first World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, in Chicago." I plan to bring out a book on the subject, with all profits going to the Institute.

Sylvia Strobel is a member of the committee planning a women's spirituality conference to be held in Sedona, Arizona on July 24th 2010. The Women's Interfaith Institute is a co-sponsor, and former Board member Jeanne Crane is a presenter. [See www.marymagdalacelebrationsedona.com]

In an effort to strengthen the board, we have brought on a new member, and for the first time, that person is male: Jim Wagner. He has been a great help. Our intention now is to build the board back to its former eight to ten members.

And so, despite the set back caused by the fire, our work continues: "*women supporting women of diverse faith in generating spiritual leadership, scholarship and service.*" Several have observed that after the fire, it has been like the phoenix rising. Not only are the people of Seneca Falls eager for the Institute to succeed, but also friends and supporters of the WII can be found throughout our nation. Many individuals and women's groups have made it possible for us to come this far, and have assured me that they are with us still. For example, the New England Women Ministers Association and several Congregational Churches have pledged yearly mission support.

As we prepare to move back into our building by October 31st, we would be grateful for your contribution to the Move Back In campaign. Our mailing address is:

Women's Interfaith Institute
P.O. Box 131
Seneca Falls, NY 13148-0131

Through our website, we plan to keep friends of the Institute updated with developments. www.womensinterfaithinstitute.org. If you have questions, please write me at: allisonstokes@earthlink.net.

May the work of the Women's Interfaith Institute-- in the Finger Lakes and in the Berkshires—continue women's empowerment for the world's betterment.