

W A R M E M B R A C E

*Unity's diverse
appeal welcomes
individual spirituality.*

by Jennifer Willis

Though its membership only totals around 400 in the Richmond area, those who have come to Unity Church seeking the "still, small voice of God" express a deep and personal connection with this spiritual group—a connection they were not able to find elsewhere, and to which they are intensely loyal. And in these days of confused morality and expanding consciousness, Unity is a path that more and more people are exploring.

Founded as a prayer fellowship in Kansas City in 1889 by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, Unity has love as its only true commandment. Claiming no specific dogma, the fellowship is based on the teachings of Jesus, as opposed to the life of Jesus. Gary Griffith, who heads Unity South on southside (soon to change its name to Unity Church of Christianity), explains that this foundation honors the truth in all religious traditions. "I believe it was Gandhi who said that truth is a golden thread which weaves its way through all religions," says Griffith. "And Unity is on the cutting edge of truth."

According to its teachings, Unity is a religion that is not religious; Christian, but not exclusively so, honoring difference while seeking universal truth. Above all, says member Ellie Newbauer, "Unity is a way of life. It's a way of looking at things and bringing people together in positive ways."

For Stan Stokes, it was the gentle and non-threatening nature of the church that first attracted him, and then ensured that he stayed. A counselor here in the Richmond area, he says that going to Unity is "like an A.A. meeting, but not A.A." Similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, he says, members come from a wide variety of backgrounds, helping to create a sort of melting pot of religious and ethnic groups.

The first Unity service Stokes attended was in Spokane, Wash., 10 years ago. The positive outlook and emphasis on spirituality rather than rigid dogma appealed to him. It was important that religious teachings and principles were not being "rammed down [his] throat," and that Unity was extremely open-minded—no punishment or chastisement for having different feelings or ideas than the main group.

For member Tom Johnston, Unity simply "hit a nerve...It's all that you want [in a church]," he explains, "with none of the bad." Two key aspects of Unity are of greatest importance to Johnston: that there is no concept of sin, damnation, or hell; and that Jesus is held up as an example rather than as an absolute. He was "an individual who proved how good a human could be," says Johnston, who believes that everyone has this same

potential, though the road is not easy.

While some outsiders may view Unity as a cult, it fails to meet that definition, revolving around a concept rather than a personality. And that concept, say Unity members, is love.

Unity's inclusive teachings attribute both male and female elements to God, and the invoked names of both "Father" and "Mother" are readily interchanged, with every individual as a piece of that spirit. Not typically ritualistic, Unity has recently returned to the practice of ritual in their services, emphasizing the life-giving nature of these events—such as communion as symbolic of every individual's personal union with God. Indeed, the typical Unity service includes moments of quiet reflection and meditation.

Many members approach Unity having been left unsatisfied by other religious affiliations, but they have one binding factor in common—the search for truth and God within. Unity encourages this life journey in a seemingly unrestricted environment of love and acceptance, as its goal from the very beginning has been to teach a positive way of life. ■

For more information on Unity, call Unity South Church (Gary Griffith: 744-2116 or Lisa Lambeth: 320-4857) or Unity of Richmond (278-6489).



Ellie Newbauer and Gary Griffith visit the site of Unity South's new church on Buford Road. Senior members like Newbauer, says Griffith, "have wisdom and experience than I can't even touch."