

# History of First Existentialist

Notes from the late great Membership Guild chair, Robert Stewart  
Updated by Founding Member Dr. Jean Heinrich

The First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta began in 1976 when approximately ten individuals gathered on Friday evenings in a private home in Decatur, Georgia for “Celebration of Life” services. These services, guided by founder Rev. R. Lanier Clance, were based on existential principles and were filled with music, art, theater, and Spoken Word.

This group of individuals has been described as “optimistic” and has grown from approximately 10 to 150 current members and friends.

In 1978, the membership voted to join the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. We met in the Decatur YMCA as our membership grew, and in 1980, assumed ownership of 470 Candler Park Drive, Atlanta (The Old Stone Church), and changed our name from Church to Congregation to reflect our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Marsha Mitchiner, Dean Rowley, and Janna Nelson were ordained as existentialist ministers in 1992, 1994, and 2002, respectively. Rev. Clance retired in 2001, and Rev. Janna Nelson served as full-time minister until 2004.

In 2005, the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta became an independent fellowship with Rev. Marsha Mitchiner serving as our fellowship minister, which she continues today. We continue weekly Celebrations of Life Sunday morning services, with many social justice activities and artistic events.

**Reverend Clance wanted the spiritual community that would become The First Existentialist Congregation to have these values:**

- offer satisfying, intellectual and aesthetic stimulation with music and the arts, with sensitive and caring people who weren't smiling all the time.
- honor authentic experience and the full range of human experience, including the despair and loneliness in existence and, in so doing, make authentic connections.
- recognize the paradox: “acknowledging pain in human existence allows for the possibility of joy and excitement.”
- support for “what I am and what I want to be.”
- develop energy and encouragement to think and feel for oneself.
- honor the human being's ability to learn and to change “without saying this is good and this is bad.”
- respect for “I am not responsible for what happens; I am responsible for choosing how I respond.”