

Celebration highlights First Unitarian's history

By Star-Advertiser staff



Rev. Jonipher Kwong

COURTESY PHOTO

First Unitarian Church of Honolulu will celebrate two milestones next week: its 60th anniversary as a certified member of the American Unitarian Association and the 100th anniversary of the completion of its Nuuanu church building.

The event will begin at 6 p.m. May 18 at the church at 2500 Pali Highway. Tickets are \$60 and include a Hawaiian buffet dinner and entertainment. Contact the church at 595-4047 or office@unitariansofhi.org for tickets. Child care is available.

Gini Courter, chief governance officer for the Unitarian Universalist Association, will be the guest speaker, and members of the Kupuna Anthology Group will share their stories.

President Barack Obama attended Sunday School at First Unitarian in the 1970s, and in 2008 held the memorial service there for his maternal grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, a church news release said.

The Rev. Jonipher Kwong, the church's minister, said, "Within these 100-year-old walls lie our spiritual values to treat everyone with aloha and respect, and our eternal quest for social justice. Over the past 60 years, our sacred space cultivated the mind and opened the heart of a young man named Barack Obama... This celebration is not just about the past, but it is about building a future of hope for our community."

Since December the church has taken on a more public role in social justice issues, opening its doors to the community to provide a space for mourning and reflection on the violence in Newtown, Conn., with the Sandy Hook Elementary School Interfaith Prayer Vigil. The church also took the lead in an interfaith blessing service in the Martin Luther King Jr. Day observance in January.

In February, Kwong, the church's first openly gay pastor, was one of the organizers and speakers at the Hawaii United for Marriage Lobby Day in the push for legislation supporting marriage equality, and church members showed their support in the "Lighting the Way to Justice" campaign in March, as the Supreme Court began hearing cases regarding same-sex marriage.

The church building was built by Richard Cooke, a missionary descendant, in 1913. It was originally a two-bedroom house with ohia floors and Chinese teak paneling, enlarged in 1939 and later sold to Bishop Estate to be used as a dormitory for 45 Kamehameha Girls' School students. The first church service was held Dec. 24, 1962, the release said.