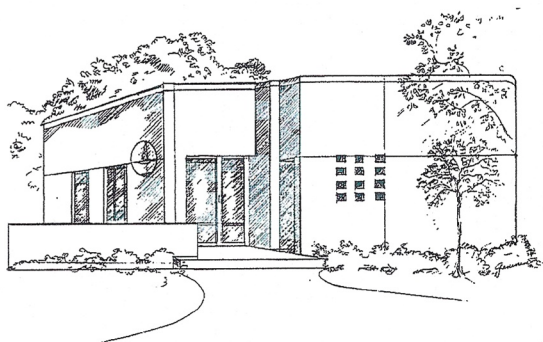


Golden Jubilee Edition

A Half Century Of Progress



The History of the
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Sarasota
1952-2002



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**The History of the
Unitarian Universalist Church
of Sarasota
1952-2002**

By

Janet Odell

With Special Thanks to:

Walt Billings
Alice Boudreau
Ellen Cone
Dave Eicher
Steve Ellis
Betty Ann Harwood
Don Johns
Esther Martin
Jean Shoemaker
Betty Van Orden
The late Phyllis Vendig
and all the others who so freely shared their information



This book was created through the efforts of many people. In addition to those who have already been named, we would like to thank Jennifer Highland, who served as coordinator and inspiration for the cover design, Judy Ritt, who acted as copy editor and typesetter, Sue Holden and Don Beaudreault for their proofreading, and the members of the 50th Anniversary Celebration Committee for their help and encouragement.

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Prologue



Fifty years ago a dedicated group of religious free thinkers in our city met for the first time and created what eventually was to become the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota. Our city was a very different place to live in than it is now, but the need for a community of individuals committed to freedom of religious expression, justice in social causes, and compassion for one and all was as viable and strong as it is at present. We who are the members and friends of our church today should be ever appreciative of those who have blazed the trail for our liberating faith. And may we, like them, continue to carry forth noble ideals in thought, word, and deed.

-Rev. Don Beaudreault



The first gathering: Some of those present were Mr. Miller, Phyllis Vendig, Gay Boylston, Dorothy Stone, Dolores Steinecke, Mrs. Miller, Stephen Steinecke, Mrs. Calhoun, Dr. Martin, Louise Floethe, Richard Floethe, Irwin Vendig, Henry James, and Jack Siler.



In The Beginning

The first part of the following chronicle (from 1952-1988) has been taken from the historical accounts prepared for the 25th and 36th Anniversary Celebrations by Jane Swett and Ken Happy, respectively. They have been fleshed out with additional detail supplied by members, and edited to avoid repetition. The ensuing 15 years are documented in somewhat more detail, as much has happened. We wish to acknowledge the help of the many members who shared their recollections with us.

-Janet Odell

In the beginning, there was Steve Steinecke. When the Steineckes moved to Sarasota late in 1951, Steve set about looking for some fellow Unitarians and, through the Church of the Larger Fellowship, found Irving and Phyllis Vendig. In response to a newspaper ad, an organizational meeting was held at the Ringling Hotel on February 23, 1952. Enough interest was indicated to justify a Fellowship, and the first meeting was held at the garden room of the Vendig home on March 2, 1952. The following month the Unitarian Fellowship of Sarasota was officially recognized by the American Unitarian Association.

As the group outgrew the garden room, meetings were held at the Women's Club, the Sarasota Recreation Club, and the Symphony Rehearsal Hall (now David Cohen Hall) with church school in the Youth Center. Jean Shoemaker, who came to Sarasota in the 1950s, remembers holding Sunday School in a building behind the Municipal Auditorium. According to Jean, Sarasota was attracting large numbers of young couples back then and the Religious Education classes were full of children as a result. Another of her memories was carrying the church's hymnals in her car for several years because the church had no storage space of its own. The services were conducted by occasional visiting ministers and speakers.



M. McKarl Nielsen (1960-1964)



M. McKarl Nielsen

In December, 1954, Irving Vendig met up with one M. McKarl Nielsen and discovered that Karl was a retired Unitarian minister wintering in Sarasota. Karl was invited to preach to the Fellowship and the response was electrifying. The following year, he was engaged to be part-time minister, preaching regularly for the six months he was in Sarasota.

Thanks primarily to Karl's eloquent and sensitive sermons, the Fellowship increased to 182 members and officially became the Unitarian Church of Sarasota on February 18, 1960. McKarl Nielsen was installed as its first minister.

Steve Steinecke had nurtured all phases of the fledgling Fellowship since its founding, serving as president from 1952 until his death in 1957. He was helped enormously by his daughter, Dolores, who served as our church treasurer for over 20 years. Along with Mrs. Albert Miller, Dolores instituted the Church school in 1953. It was also Dolores, along with Nell Stover, who organized the Women's Alliance in 1958.

A Place of Our Own

Mr. Steinecke left a bequest to the church with the stipulation that it was to be used specifically for the construction of a church building and that construction on such a building must begin within five years of his death. With this needed nudge, some additional contributions to the Stephen W. Steinecke Memorial Building Fund, and a gift of land from Dr. and Mrs. Irving Rosenbaum, a site was acquired in 1960.

The Building Fund Drive began in earnest in 1961 and, on January 28, 1962, we had a ground-breaking ceremony. Helping turn over the first spadeful was our much beloved Gertrude Martin, 92, the first member to sign the book. Donald Johns served as Chairman of the Building Committee. Meeting with his friend, Syd Solomon, he persuaded the artist to design the beautiful stained glass windows that are the special feature of the Sanctuary. Donations from members helped pay for them. Under

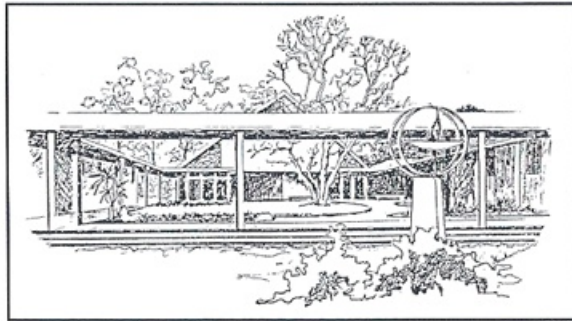


Stephen Steinecke

these windows, there are plaques honoring four men: Stephen Steinecke, founder of the original Fellowship and first president; the father of McKarl Nielsen, the first minister; Kenneth Happy, president for two different terms (and father of our current president); and John Lane. Unfortunately, all that is currently known of John Lane is that he brought his family to Sarasota in the 1950s, and lived here until the early 1960s. We do know from Jean Shoemaker that his children attended Religious Education classes. It is probable that Mrs. Lane gave a donation for the windows.

Mrs. Solomon, the artist's wife, did not see the windows until the Spring of 2001. At that time she said that she considered them some of her husband's finest work.

In October, 1962, we held our first service in our new building. This all sounds easier than it was. Money was always a problem, and we had to leave out some desired features, like air conditioning and the kitchen-office wing at the rear. Even after air conditioning was installed, the women of the Church continued for years to perform miracles with inadequate facilities.



Rendering of the original church structure

Minister Emeritus

In the spring of 1964 Karl Nielsen retired. We wanted to make him Minister Emeritus, but he refused, wishing to give the new minister a free hand. In 1967 we elected him Minister Emeritus anyway, without giving him a chance to refuse. For the rest of his life, though he occupied our pulpit only occasionally, Karl and his wife Lucienne were steadfast supporters of the church, giving warm encouragement to succeeding ministers. Upon his death in 1969, Karl Nielsen left a generous bequest to the church of \$10,000.



Khoren Arisian (1964-1966)

In the spring of 1964 the Rev. Khoren Arisian, minister of the First Unitarian Society of Iowa City, was called to our church, and assumed his duties in November of that year. We remember him as a compelling preacher and scholar whose honors included a Skinner Sermon Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. He had articles published in the *Register-Leader*, and was an editor of the *Journal of the Liberal Ministry*. It was during his ministry that we held a highly successful series of evening lectures on Existentialism which were well attended by townspeople and students and faculty from New College.

Jefferson Center

In the late 1960s, the Sarasota church played a part in the creation of Jefferson Center, located at 930 N. Tamiami Trail. The property was the brainchild of three UU Districts – the Mid-South, the Thomas Jefferson, and the Florida – which determined the need for a retirement center and chose Sarasota. In order to secure the \$4 million federal loan, Don Johns, who was president of the church at that time, had to go to Washington and sign a note for \$1 million. He says, “It was the scariest thing I have done in my life.” On March 15, 1968, keys to the building were turned over to the trustees, and dedication of the new facility followed on March 30. Since then, church members have represented a majority on the Center’s Board of Trustees. As of this writing, seven of the nine Board members are UUs.

Crisis in the Congregation

In 1966 disagreement over Khoren’s ministry brought our church its greatest crisis. He had his detractors and supporters. One church member wryly dubbed them “the Dissidents and the Disciples,” but there was nothing humorous in the situation. Each side was sure that Right was on its side, so we had the unlovely spectacle of an unholy holy war. Khoren resigned in the spring of 1966 to accept a Merrill Fellowship at Harvard (going from there to a position as Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture). Nevertheless, feelings ran so high that many resignations were tendered from both sides of the dispute. The remnant of the congregation was left with the task of picking up the pieces.



Todd J. Taylor (1967-1970)

We struggled along without a minister for a year and then, in the summer of 1967, called the Rev. Todd J. Taylor, who had been on the administrative staff of the UU Association in Boston. During Todd's ministry there was a renewed emphasis on religious education and youth programs and a number of creative and innovative special church services. His Christmas services called forth all the art and talent in the congregation, and there was a memorable jazz service.

The Church Becomes a Target

Disaster struck – twice – in 1969. The church building was cruelly and extensively vandalized. There was much broken glass, a piano was destroyed, even a tree had its branches lopped off. Then a second instance occurred on a Saturday night and we were greeted by wreckage on a rainy Sunday morning. Todd conducted a service anyway in one of the double classrooms. We spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning up the mess (with some help from New College students) and even prepared for the Christmas service. In all that ugliness, it was one of our finest hours. It was some time during this period, we're told, that members discovered a burning cross on the church lawn. They were turbulent times for all of us.

In July 1970, Todd resigned to become Interdistrict Representative for the Florida Mid-South and Thomas Jefferson Districts of the UUA.

We spent another year without a minister.



Thomas J. Savage (1971-1980)

In the summer of 1971 we called the Rev. Thomas J. Savage, assistant minister of the Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin. Tom, a world traveler and student of comparative world religions, instituted special Sunday services centering around the art and religion of various countries, as well as seminars and film showings by himself and members of the congregation. He served for a year as president of the United Nations Association of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, masterminding an enormously successful United Nations Fair at the Sarasota Exhibition Hall in October 1977.

A recurring theme of Tom's sermons seemed to be "Let's agree to disagree agreeably." Perhaps it was that theme and another repeated admonition to love one another that, during his tenure, brought a steady increase in our membership, peaking at 321. Although Tom promoted activities to further international understanding, it was in his wonderfully successful production, "Hello, America," at the Sarasota Exhibition Hall that he reached his apogee in community activity.

Extending Our Boundaries

It was during Tom's ministry that we purchased the property adjoining us on the east side. The property, which included a house, a shed, and a well, was purchased on June 6, 1976 for \$423,650. For several years thereafter, the church rented out the property before deciding the space was needed for parking. We had been using the well water to irrigate the landscaping, but, when the house was demolished, the well, too, was sacrificed for our present parking lot.

In 1973, our minister began leading a double life. With the Board's consent, but otherwise unbeknownst to the congregation, Tom had signed on as a Sarasota County Deputy Sheriff. In January 1974, he broke the news dramatically, appearing in the pulpit in uniform and delivered a sermon entitled "Cherubim and Sheriffim." He received a standing ovation.

By the time of the 25th Anniversary Celebration in 1977, the congregation looked forward with hope and confidence to continuing to be a "fellowship of seekers" and the caring community it had always been.



Sidney A. Peterman (1980-1981)

Following the resignation of the Rev. Thomas Savage, we sought an Interim Minister through the UUA. We were most fortunate in our call to the Rev. Sidney A. Peterman, a warm and dedicated minister. He stimulated us to raise our sights in the operational aspects of the church. It was he who helped us move toward a sound financial base.

Year-Round Services and Other Enhancements

Stu Richardson was president in 1980. It was his suggestion that services be held in the summer (at that time, many UU churches were closed during

the summer months). Outside speakers were brought in and the first year was declared a success. Ever since, our church has held services year round. Over the years, the Celebrations Committee has greatly enhanced these summer services. An added feature in 1980 was that anyone who wished to could join a group going out for lunch at local restaurants.

During Sid Peterman's ministry the tradition of a shared Thanksgiving Dinner was begun. Women volunteering as hostesses decorated their tables, making the Sanctuary a place of beauty and hospitality. These dinners continued for several years and, happily, have begun again, though not in such elaborate detail.

Ken Happy became president in 1981, worked with Sid Peterman during his term as interim minister, and stayed on for another year to help smooth the transition to a new minister. For over a decade more, Ken was a vibrant and tireless worker in all phases of Church leadership. He was irreplaceable and his death in 1991 left a huge hole in our Church family.



Richard A Kellaway (1981-1986)

A very effective Search Committee chaired by Joan O'Hara brought us the Rev. Richard A. Kellaway of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Richard had served not only as a minister in churches such as the one in New Bedford but also as a staff member of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in Boston. His interest in the larger community was to serve us well as he became very active in the community.

A Host of Changes

Action! That could sum up Richard's years with us. Although in the works before his arrival, the final step was taken that first Fall to change the name of the church from Unitarian to Unitarian Universalist. That shook a few of us. As we were recovering from that, the canopy over the chancel came down and the railing surrounding the chancel disappeared. Then, plans were laid for a building expansion. Both wings were doubled in size, a modern kitchen was added, new restrooms replaced old, custodial storage and work spaces were provided, and offices with workroom arranged as a unit moved to the east wing. Dave Eicher, as head of the Building Committee, watched with satisfaction as the marl roadways turned to macadam and the front

marl entrance became green grass. The playground was moved from the east to the west side of our property and the Religious Education wing was provided with new facilities and an office for an RE director. The Rev. Roger E. Cowan, who later became minister of the First Unitarian Church of Miami, was employed to help us raise the funds to make all of this possible. At the time of the 36th Anniversary Celebration, \$302,000 had been raised for Funding Our Future, as the effort was called.

The preceding sentences merely detail the changes made. For years the women had provided meals for church events in a kitchen space no bigger than in a private home. A committee of these women participated in the planning process, advancing their ideas of what was needed in the new facility and choosing the equipment. The new kitchen, although not perfect, made working there a joy. But it took many more years for us to get refrigerators of adequate size. No one appreciated the new meeting room, soon designated as the Jefferson Room, more than members who had to hold meetings and entertain outside visitors in the drab and shabby other half of the kitchen space. A bright new room with better looking furniture did wonders for our morale. The furniture has been upgraded several times since then.

Under Richard's leadership, our church, in cooperation with New College and the Florida Endowment for Humanities, sponsored a Conference of Community & Care-Providing Leaders on "The Future of Health Care in Sarasota County" in 1964. It was held at New College and was well attended by leaders of the healthcare and service community. As a result of that conference, smaller groups met monthly at our church during the following year.

The Memorial Garden is Created

In 1982 Betty Richardson Van Orden and Jean Kennedy asked the Board of Trustees for permission to plant two trees in memory of their husbands. This was granted and bronze plaques were placed on the outside west wall of the Sanctuary. During Joe Colella's term as president, he platted the Memorial Garden, and a set of regulations and fees for burial of ashes was established. Much later, under the leadership of Diane Happy, extensive plantings and landscaping was done. Brick walks and the pond added even more beauty.

Although our church membership remained fairly stable during Richard's tenure, our Religious Education program burst into bloom under the leader-

ship of Phyllis Edelman. This brought in a number of new young adults.

The Arts Council is Formed

Church president Joan E. O'Hara invited 30 members of the congregation to an Arts Council formation meeting held on June 4, 1984. Walt Billings, Roberta Bouverat, Phyllis Edelman, Adrienne Harmes, Richard Kellaway, Mickey Schulte, Bronwen Sloane, and Lucille Wallace attended this first meeting. On June 6 the Board of Trustees approved the committee's guidelines. The Arts Council was created to make the arts an important part of the general church program for both children and adults, including making artistic expression a part of the Sunday service. The Council was put in charge of overseeing gifts and purchases of art for the church as well. In 1992 the Arts Council's duties were expanded to include matters of general beautification of the church and grounds. Several shows of works by local artists and talented high school students have been held yearly.

The Artisans

The Wednesday Workers (now the Artisans) started in 1986 simply as a weekly gathering of women who liked to sew and do crafts. Soon, they started making holiday craft items. In 1987, they held an after-church sale of these, plus baked goods and some needlepoint objects.

In 1988 Nancy Sciore and John Millett organized the first All-Church Fair. In addition to the items offered at the earlier sale, books, rummage, Vermont cheeses, UU tee shirts, plants, gift items from world travelers and food were offered. Breakfast and lunch were also served. In 2000, the sale of rummage moved to the spring in the form of a Flea Market. The sale of crafts became the Holiday Fair, now held each November.

The mandalas on the wall behind the pulpit were designed and executed by church member Dick Oxley in 1988 after Persis Penningrath commissioned them in memory of her husband. The UU banner is the work of church member Raynore Pope.

A Call From Home

A call from his former church at New Bedford was received and accepted by Richard in 1986, and we started searching for a new minister.



Eileen B. Karpeles (1986-1987)

Once again, in the short span of five years, we were to seek candidates for an Interim Minister of our congregation. Once again, we were fortunate in obtaining a warm and dedicated minister, Eileen B. Karpeles. In helping to prepare for our next "settled" minister, her specialties seemed to be in the areas of conflict analysis, self analysis, and caring.

Old attitudes die hard. One member, "a gentleman of the old school" no doubt, told the Board that he would not come to Church until a male minister was hired. "Women have no place in the pulpit," he declared!

When Eileen left, she did not go far away. She became the Interim Minister in Boca Raton.



Richard E. Benner (1987-1999)

It took a second request to the UUA in Boston for names of more candidates to enable us to find just the right person for Sarasota UU's – the Rev. Richard E. Benner. Already in February, 1988, the signs were good. Dick and the members of the congregation got off to a good start and, in the ensuing years, there was a major increase in church activities.

Marie Millett was president of the church from 1989 to 1990. She says, "I sort of felt as if I was treading water trying to keep things on an even keel. The congregation was wonderfully supportive. The most important thing we did that year was to adopt the Long Range Plan."

Birth of the Social Concerns Committee

The Social Concerns Committee was organized in January, 1990, with Ellen Betz and Barbara Morton as leaders. That same year the Board voted to adopt the Helen R. Payne Day Nursery as a church project. The church is still heavily involved with the Newtown facility, with two church members currently serving on the Nursery's Board of Trustees.

Members continued to be busy with social outreach programs. For several years Jack and Betty Ann Harwood had been involved with the children's immunization program. After a long effort and much red tape, they were

finally able to open an immunization clinic at our church on September 9, 1998. It has continued to be held on the second Wednesday of each month. When Jack and Betty Ann were no longer able to run the clinic, Ruth Steinbrecher, a former church member, took over, with current member Ruth Sheridan serving as liaison with the Board. Other outreach activities included assisting the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (known as HIPPY) under the leadership of Velma Clemence, regular contributions to the All Faiths Food Bank, and a close association with Planned Parenthood. In 1996, the church was officially designated as a "Hate Free Zone."

During this same period, John and Marie Millett started the Grapevine International Folk Dancers group at our church. The group drew both church members and participants from the larger community.

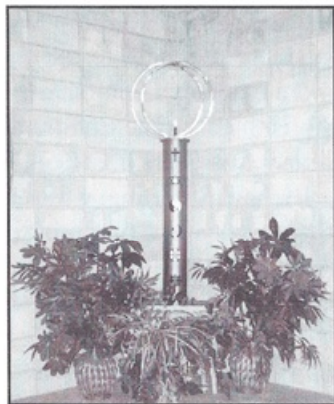
Our First Intern

During the early years of Dick Benner's ministry, the Church sponsored its first intern, Mary Ann Tate. She spent six months with us, participating in all aspects of Church life, and was later ordained in our Church. Her husband, a Scotsman, brought his bagpipes to the ceremony, lending an exotic flavor to his wife's ordination. After she was ordained, Mary Ann and her husband moved to Scotland. Sadly, she died not long afterward.

In 1995, the Board agreed to sponsor a second intern, Elizabeth Bouldin. In addition, the congregation has sponsored two candidates for the UU ministry: Arlene Cossum in June 1997 and Francesca Hughes in 1998.

More Beautification of the Church

For many years the courtyard had resembled a lake whenever it rained, much to the delight of the children. Finally, in 1990, adequate drainage was installed, brick walkways laid and benches added. A severe windstorm tore a huge limb off the large gold tree but, fortunately, the tree remained. In 1999, the stainless steel chalice was moved from its site in front of the courtyard to the west side of the courtyard. Given by Bronwen Sloane in memory of her husband Frank, the sculpture, by Walt Billings, now bears her name as well. Walt also designed



the present chalice in the Sanctuary, which depicts symbols of all major

religions. His design was chosen by church members from other designs submitted.

Music, Music, Music

Anna Bess Whitman had been music director of the church for several years. After her death, her husband Dick started a memorial fund to purchase a new piano. With added donations from members, funds were sufficient to purchase a parlor grand. Dorothy Conlon, who had been instrumental in the fund-raising efforts, selected the piano with the assistance of John Martin, who became music director in 1990. John also reinstated the choir which prospered and grew. After John's resignation, Jan Dorsett became our music director and has continued to build the choir.

During Dick Benner's time, fellowship dinners preceded the start of the annual pledge drive. Entertainment was always provided by church members acting in original skits, dancing, and singing. Rev. Benner was an enthusiastic member of the vocal group. Most of the skits and song lyrics were written by Esther Martin, who also directed these productions. Other frequent collaborators were John Martin, who served as music director, Lorraine Orr, Ellen Cone, and Sara Anderson. These shows were a big hit, enjoyed and applauded by the congregation.

A Smooth Operation

Ellen Betz was elected president in the Spring of 1992. Within months, she resigned, citing ill health, and moved away. Without even the experience of a year on the Board, Mary Anne Bowie, then vice-president, was thrust into the leadership role. As president, her focus was on applying sound business practices to the church operations. It was during her term that a more extensive computer program was installed. Mary Anne cites the establishment of the Endowment Committee and fund as the highlight of her nearly two years in office (1992-1994).

Richard Swerling, who succeeded Mary Anne as president in 1994, was a firm advocate of fundraising, and during his year in office, the first Service Auction was held. Pat Gelb and Sam Horst worked hard to secure the success of the auction and other fundraising events.

Starting the Forum

In 1994, the Forum was organized. This pre-church discussion group takes on the issues of the day, with lively exchanges of opinion from the partici-

pants. Over the years, it has expanded greatly and is a very popular church activity today, with sessions year round.

LEAP is Born

Early in 1996, Francesca Hughes, a church member who had decided to become a UU minister, started a weekly vesper program which included classes such as "Building Your Own Theology," taught by Rev. Benner. This proved to be the forerunner of the church's Lifetime Education Adult Program (LEAP), now with Nan Billings as chairperson. It continued to flourish and attract church members and other members of the community. Although occasional workshops had been held before, usually run by the minister, this was the first time such programs had been held on a regular and continuing basis.

The Tribute Fund

In September of 1997, Lucille Wallace presented a proposal to the Board for the establishment of a special kind of fundraiser to be known as the Tribute Fund. Members could make small donations to this Fund to commemorate a meaningful event or to honor a particular individual. Diane Happy became the first chair of the new Fund, which continues to run successfully. Each year, up to \$2000 is contributed and disbursed through the Fund. Contributions are noted in *CONTACT*.

Mission and Covenant Statements Are Created

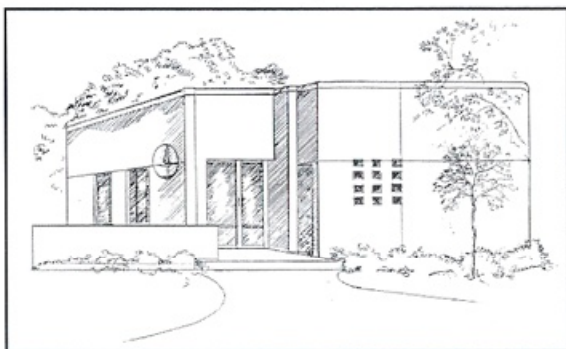
Frank Dunn became president of the church in 1995 and served for four years. His first major undertaking was the development of Mission and Covenant Statements. In an attempt to involve all members in this important project, neighborhood groups and other small group sessions were held. In March 1996 the congregation approved the Mission and Covenant Statements that are still in effect today. During Frank's tenure, the Endowment fund topped \$100,000 for the first time. It was also during Frank's presidency that the church declared itself a "Hate Free Zone" after Board members and officers, meeting in several workshops, approved the effort led by Dee Widder. Frank was also the driving force behind the Building Campaign that resulted in the construction of the new south wing.

Building a Bigger Church

In the late 1990s, when the need for more and better utilization of space became clear, members decided to have a fundraising drive. Most of the

congregation voted to build a new Sanctuary closer to Fruitville Road, with additional meeting space and church offices close to the courtyard. Unfortunately, the fund drive fell short of the needed capital, and plans had to be scaled down to match the available money.

Longtime member Fritz Wallace became chairman of the newly formed Building Committee. As a builder, he had been invaluable during the church's past construction projects (it was Fritz who had alerted members when the



Rendering of our new building

property to the east became available, and he had served on the Building Committee for the renovation of the east and west wings). Now he would oversee the construction of the new south wing.

Dave Rickard, a UUA consultant, was hired to help kick off and plan

the fundraising effort, while Marie Millett served as chair. Although the \$600,000+ goal was not reached, more than \$500,000 was raised. This was almost enough to do added repairs to the existing walkways and to build a spacious and airy south wing. It houses more efficient office space, more privacy for ministerial visitors, and a meeting room well used for both Church programs and rentals. It was dedicated on June 2, 2000.

Bed and Breakfast

In October of 1997, the Board approved the idea of running a Bed and Breakfast to benefit the church. Members offered to host out-of-town UU vacationers in their homes with the proceeds going to the church. Even though only a few families graciously opened their homes, the project has brought in over a \$1000. The hosts report there is a minimal amount of work and the experience has been most enjoyable. Fred and Bev Wiberg now act as coordinators of this program.

A Change in Direction

Obviously, the years of Rev. Benner's ministry had been full and productive, but by 1997, some members felt that the church needed to move in new directions. Aware of this, Rev. Benner announced early in October of

1997 that he intended to resign. In late February of 1998, he notified the congregation that he had been called to the ministry of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, and would be taking up his new duties by August 1. His 11-year tenure had been the longest of any other minister of our Church, and he had been active in the community – especially as a cofounder of the C. G. Jung Society of Sarasota, which now boasts 165 members. We held two celebrations in his honor before he left – one to mark his 10th year as minister, and another to bid him farewell. A Search Committee was formed to find an interim minister for the fall in a short amount of time. It was also necessary to find ways to address the divisions in the congregation caused by the minister's leaving.



Janet Newman (1998-1999)

Such was the situation that confronted the Rev. Janet Newman as she began her year as interim minister of our church. (The Search Committee had already begun the process of finding a new settled minister.)

Janet, a skilled facilitator, was equal to the task of helping the congregation begin to communicate again. Janet's year was a low-key one with few innovations, but she endeared herself to members.

The Venice Church Forms

For many years there had been discussions about forming a UU group in Venice. Under the leadership of Leonard Peck, this group was officially declared a UU Congregation by the UUA in 1998. Attendance grew rapidly, and there are currently 92 members, with over 100 attending services. Although the Sarasota church was sorry to lose some of its longtime members, it has helped the new congregation whenever possible. The two churches occasionally exchange choirs or get together for social events such as Breakfast at the Beach. Now, the Venice Congregation has hired a part-time minister, bought land, and will soon break ground on a 200 seat sanctuary.

CONTACT Goes Online

Sara Anderson became president of the church in 1999. During her tenure, all office practices were computerized and *CONTACT* went online with

a website. Sara also continued to lend her creative talents to the productions following the fellowship dinners, and left her indelible imprint on the new Religious Education program.



W. Donald Beaudreault (1999-Present)

The Search Committee invited their chosen candidate, the Rev. Donald Beaudreault, to come to Sarasota for a week in order to allow as many church members as possible to meet him. This meant an almost nonstop daily schedule of meetings and parties which he endured with grace and good humor. His two Sunday sermons gave the congregation a taste of his style, which combines the deeply philosophic with professional skill as a musician, notably a jazz pianist.

The congregation voted to call him to our pulpit and he arrived in 1999. During Don's tenure as the minister and, with very strong lay leadership, the congregation has grown to over 300 members and 60 contributing friends. We have adopted two refugee families. We have participated in the Martin Luther King Parade, with 60 walkers and other wellwishers. We are now holding the annual World AIDS Day Interfaith Service. We have the Annual Rose Frank Memorial Lectureship which has brought in such leading intellectuals as Huston Smith and Leonard Shlain. Many new groups – educational, supportive, and religious – are renting our facilities. Sunday morning services are very well attended and the budget has increased, with many very successful fundraisers. Our physical surroundings have improved as well with the new building, new landscaping, and beautification of the Memorial Garden.

Although Don is helping the Sarasota church change from a “pastoral” church to a “program” church (i.e., one in which members take on a more active and responsible role in church programs), he has also given the congregation exceptional pastoral care since his arrival.

Dedicating the New Building

In the summer of 2000, we dedicated our new building (the South Wing) and refurbished the flooring in the Jefferson Room, the former RE Office, and the four West Wing RE rooms. A volunteer labor force repainted and decorated all RE rooms, including beautiful murals on the outside doors, painted the outside of the East and West Wings to match the new South

Wing, refurbished the playground, and landscaped the areas around the new building and sign.

Aiding Refugees

In 2000, the church sponsored a refugee couple, Coptic Christians from Egypt, but originally from Ethiopia. In 2001, a second refugee family from Bosnia via Germany was sponsored. Sue Sherman and Ed Cossum have spearheaded the work of assisting the refugees.

Our Church at 50

As this history goes to print in February 2002, the Sarasota church, under the able leadership of President Dick Happy, is in excellent condition, with over 300 members. The Religious Education program is now a cooperative one. After a year of parental input, we decided to split the RE Director's position, with Diane Happy and Linda Heusner currently serving as our co-directors. Our church office is being run smoothly and competently by Sue Holden, our administrative assistant, and George Balekdjian, our bookkeeper and CONTACT editor. The physical condition of the campus is good. Although our beloved caretaker, Harry Henry, retired after 10 years, his replacement, Pietro DiPascale, is doing a good job with the able assistance of a very enthusiastic and hard-working Building and Grounds Committee. Pledge drives have been successful for the past few years, the budget is balanced, and for the first time, there was a surplus. We can look forward confidently and hopefully to the future.



Epilogue



As we said initially, “in the beginning there was Steve Steinecke” and “Steve Steinecke found Irving and Phyllis Vendig.” Fifty years later, we are 307 members strong and growing, have a beautiful church complex, a minister, a paid staff, and a formal RE program. Fifty years of constructing buildings, developing bylaws, calling ministers, meeting in committees, devising programs. Fifty years of agreeing – and disagreeing. Fifty years of hard work. Fifty eventful and fruitful years.

As the 50th anniversary congregation, we look back at our half century and say “Well done, Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota!” And 50 years from now, another group of church history writers will gather again to celebrate our Centennial year. We hope they will be able to once again say loudly and clearly:

“Well done, Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota!”

-Richard Happy, President