

TriUU History

Formation

In the 1970s a few liberal thinking Marion County residents, led by Ethical Culturalist Felix Hirsch, arranged sporadic public meetings for prospective UU's. In the early 80s organizational meetings were held in various locations including participant's homes, a motel and the Ocala Library. In 1982 the group invited Sid Peterman, UU Inter-District Representative, to meet with them regarding becoming affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association. Mr. Peterman suggested that they continue to work to grow their numbers explaining that twelve members were required to apply for affiliation with the UUA. He also suggested that they meet monthly on a regular schedule. The group decided to begin their regular monthly meetings with a picnic, on August 29, 1982, in Cherokee Park in Belleview, Florida. At this time attendance was usually around six to eight participants.

In June 1983 the group decided to meet twice each month. At this time meetings were held Sunday evenings at 7:00pm in the Friends Meeting House located in northeast Ocala, Florida

At a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association held October 22-23, 1983, it was voted to approve the application of and to receive into membership in the Association, The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County, Florida.

Meeting Spaces

Following acceptance in to the UUA the congregation met every Sunday morning in a building located, in Cherokee Park, in Belleview, Florida. This building was restricted to adults only. As new members and friends, with children, joined the Fellowship there was a need and interest in developing a religious education program. The Fellowship responded to this need by leaving Cherokee Park and renting space in Trinity Villas in Ocala, Florida. The relationship with Trinity was brief; only two services. Both services were attended by individuals presumed to be residents of Trinity Villas. They arrived in dark clothes, heads bowed, holding Bible's against their chests. They arrived and sat quietly and left immediately after the service. The congregation was uncomfortable with these "guests". A few days following the second meeting UUFMC received a phone call terminating the relationship. The caller stated that due to UU religious beliefs The Villas were no longer available to the Fellowship as a meeting place.

Following the brief stay at Trinity Villas, the UUFMC congregation moved to the Silver Springs Shores Community Center. This location was shared by another church group. The meeting spaces were separated from one another, by a wall, however, singing from the other group was so exuberant that UUFMC members could not hear the speakers,

carry on conversations or hear themselves sing. These problems made another move necessary.

The next stop was the Silver Springs Shores Youth Center which was located in another part of the same complex. The Youth Center meeting room presented different challenges. Every Sunday service participants had to remove different types of recreation equipment which was stored in the room where they would meet. At the conclusion of the service the equipment had to be returned to the room in preparation for the Monday morning youth activities.

Congregation member Felix Hirsch was a resident of Silver Springs Shores. He learned that the General Development Corporation had reserved land in Silver Springs Shores for religious organizations to purchase and build on. He brought this information to UUFMC members who made the decision to purchase a one- and one-half acre lot (tract G, unit 9) for \$12,000.

With the land purchased, the members and friends of the congregation moved forward with their plan to build. They began working with builders to find one who could help them keep the costs down. They found a contractor who was willing to lower the cost to \$36,000 because the fellowship said they would do all the painting, landscaping, finish work, and purchase all the flooring and appliances and other items.

The congregation received a \$20,000 loan from the UUA and needed to make up the shortfall. So, members and friends did the traditional bake sales and auctions, and then found a unique way to raise some money. The county did a "Safety Break" where groups could "sell" coffee and donuts at certain rest stops along I-75. The congregation was able to get donuts donated to them, and so they did this three times a week for six months. They raised \$2500.

The building was dedicated on February 9, 1986. The mortgage was paid off by 1990. However, the area was not growing, and the church was hard to find. So, the congregation decided to sell this building in 2005 and move closer to The Villages where 50% of their membership lived. The Villages is the largest retirement community in the country with a population as of 2020 of 79,372.

Before ending up in this current location in Summerfield the fellowship rented space at an Elk's Lodge.

The fellowship purchased the two acres of land in Summerfield in May 2003. The current building was opened for service in June 2008.

Stained Glass Windows

Originally, our stained-glass windows were in St. Mark's Catholic Church, Bottineau, ND. When the windows were discarded by the church a priest friend of Emery Bingley, Muriel Bingley's husband, told Emery that he could take the windows. Emery restored them, put them in Oak frames, and hung them in the Bingley's North Dakota home. During those years in North Dakota Muriel discovered the Unitarian Church in Grand Forks, or maybe the Church discovered her, sometimes it is difficult to determine the direction of the flow. After Emery died Muriel moved to The Villages in Central Florida and brought the windows with her. Even though she had no immediate use for them, they had become an important part of her life and she couldn't leave them behind. She put them in storage.

Muriel's move to central Florida coincided with the early years of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County. She joined with this small group of progressive freethinkers as they struggled to realize their dream of a religious home that would foster and nurture the spiritual life of like-minded folks in central Florida. She served on the Board of Trustees, both as a member and as the President.

How fortunate we are that Muriel and her gift of the windows arrived during the planning and design stages of our beloved building. How honored we are that the windows found a permanent home on our Chancel for all to see and enjoy.

The historical story of how the windows made their way to us is, of course, compelling. Beyond that, however, is the significance of how their presence continues to impact us, sometimes in subtle ways.

A few years ago, when it was decided that the Building and Grounds team would paint the exterior of the building to give it a new look, we were told that choosing a color is the worst decision a congregation can attempt. It is divisive no matter how it is handled. So, no one from the congregation should be involved with the color choice. Yet, a grayish blue swatch caught the eyes of those involved. Look at the windows. Can you see it? Swirls of gray-blue mixing with shades of light brown. The windows spoke and we listened. As it turned out the color was Labradorite, Sherwin Williams color of the year. Coincidence? Perhaps. Labradorite is a gemstone found in Labrador and has been used in Spiritual practices of the indigenous peoples of that area. Of course, a favorite hymn for many of us is "Blue Boat Home." Is there an untold story there?

On a more obvious note, when the Building and Grounds team considered painting the Sanctuary. We looked, as we had in the past, to the windows. Yes, the light tan color that preceded the purple was suggested by the windows. Although a color choice can be a matter of starting over with a new and different look, color choice can also be used to focus attention on things of importance. That, of course, was the primary reason for choosing shades of purple.

The windows are a prominent feature of the Tri-UU Logo and appear in several places, including our name tags and brochures. In fact, they are an integral part of our identity.

Ministers

Early in the history of the congregation there was Rev. J. Robert Bath, a retired UU minister from Maine, who wintered in Florida. He was actively involved in the congregation during the season he was in Florida. Rev. Bath provided the congregation excellent programs which resulted in increased attendance and growth in membership.

In November 1986 the well-loved Rev. J. Robert Bath and his wife Phyllis notified the congregation that they would no longer be wintering in Florida

In 1987 the congregation received partial funding for a weekend minister. The Reverend Jack Donovan, who served the congregation in Gainesville, agreed to be with the congregation a few weekends a year doing Sunday services and being involved in Board meetings, orientation programs, committee meetings, etc.

In 1988 the Reverend John DeWolf-Hurt and Mary Louise DeWolf-Hurt, then new District Co-executives moved into Silver Spring Shores. In 1997 Mary Louise DeWolfe-Hurt, who was by then retired from her district position, requested that the congregation be her sponsor as a student preparing for Fellowship as a UU minister. The sponsorship included giving Mary Louise opportunities to preach, to represent the congregation in community activities involving religious and social issues and concerns and providing her the same compensation as with other speakers. The congregation voted to approve this sponsorship on September 14, 1997. Rev. Mary Louise DeWolfe's ordination ceremony was held at the congregation in 2001.

The Rev. Janet Onnie became consulting minister to the congregation in 2010. After three years as consulting minister Rev. Onnie was installed as the congregation's first full time settled minister.

The congregation has served as a teaching congregation, having had three intern student ministers. In May 2015 the congregation welcomed its first student minister, Tracie Barrett-Welser. Rev. Barrett-Welser was ordained by the congregation in 2017. In 2018, second ministerial intern, Christine Dance was welcomed and in 2019 the third ministerial intern, Joe Donatone.

Tri-UU served as the congregation of record for a community minister, Rev. David Etherington. Rev. Etherington monitored conditions in the Middle East for treatment of the Palestinians as a special assignment with an international organization. Rev. David spoke at Tri-UU about his observations and experiences.

Music and Musicians

TRiUU's music history is not without a number of strong willed and highly opinionated characters. But it should not be lost on our membership that true leaders are often those who do not shy away from expressing their opinions, and sometimes forcefully. The good news is that UUFMC-TriUU's music hall of fame contains outstanding musicians.

Felix Hirsch, an excellent pianist and founding member of UUFMC, also served as Board President. Jim and Dottie O'Hara worked to get recorded songs from the UU hymnal played at Sunday services when Felix's health deteriorated.

The congregation has been composed of "more mature" members from its inception and the musicians have not been immune from physical setbacks. A case in point is Phyllis Sharpe who has been described as a virtuoso who "made the grand piano sing." She had been entrancing the congregation with her playing and then suffered a brain tumor which required surgical removal. After much therapy including re-teaching herself piano techniques and musicianship, she again entertained the congregation with her abilities. There is a plaque and hooked rug in the gathering space of the current meeting house celebrating Phyllis's life and contribution to the congregation.

Until very recently most of the musicians serving TriUU have done so on a voluntary basis. Jack Diamant did as well as Gerri Mellen. Jim Mullen played recorder from time to time, much to the delight of the congregation. And TriUU has been blessed with a number of pianists which included (in addition to those named above) Sylvia Kelch, Ruth Prentice, Al Pinter, Shirley Loebel and Claire Hunter who was sometimes accompanied by her husband Dani on drum or bass guitar. Sara Kallionan, a professional pianist has assisted the choir by her skillful accompanying several times in recent years. Additionally, the congregation heard the exquisite piano playing of Marilyn McLean several times. The congregation has also benefitted from the playing of Cak Marshall.

The story of music at TriUU would not be complete without a note about Rev. Janet Onnie and Al and Nancy Solberg. Rev. Onnie, a professional musician prior to her ministry here is said to have raised the quality of music at TriUU. She also expressed her opinions about what music should be included in the congregation's repertoire. Apparently, there had existed a prohibition against the choir and congregation singing any hymns containing the words "God" or "Jesus" in them prior to her being called. Rev. Onnie put the kibosh on that prohibition, and that difference enabled Al Solberg to take over the direction of the choir. Al was ably assisted by his wife, Nancy, who, in addition to purchasing and organizing a music library of more popular up-beat sheet music, kept the morale of the choir members high by hosting choir potlucks and singalongs at the Solberg home. At the time Al took over there were approximately 9 people in the choir. By the time he retired as director there were approximately 18-20 regular members. And although many of the choir members had previous musical experience, Al remembers that a lot of time was spent in musical training while he was at the choir's helm. Perhaps

Al was influenced by Al Pinter who had previously directed the choir and was described by Al as “one tough guy.”

After Al retired, the choir was directed temporarily by Rev. Onnie or Peggy Roberts until a permanent music director could be found. Peggy sometimes sang solos at services when Rev. Onnie was not in the pulpit and during the summer when the choir did not assemble.

In late 2018-2019, the congregation raised a fund to help pay the salary of a musical director and the congregation hired Vicky DeLys Hyde. After a brief stint, she and the congregation parted ways, and the congregation hired Donna Kagan to replace her. Donna, a totally gregarious and charming person started rehearsing and performing with the choir along with her friend and pianist, Carole Makus, but then had the terrible misfortune to wear the director's cloak during the Covid-19 pandemic which resulted in the choir not being able to practice together, nor sing in person. Notwithstanding this huge impediment, she, along with musicianarranger and computer guru Frank Kelly produced recordings of songs pieced together by the choir members recording themselves individually or sung by Donna accompanying herself or with backgrounds provided by Frank. It seems the congregation was much awed by and appreciated this effort.

When Donna left the congregation TRiUU hired Michael Genslinger as its musical director. Michael immediately stepped into the void left by Donna's leaving and impressed us with his voice, his virtuosity on trumpet and his apparently easy manner in directing senior citizens to sing. Of course, these talents were honed by his being the music director in the Umatilla school system and the proud parent of a one-year-old boy! Michael was with the congregation until he was offered his dream job teaching in a university music program.

Justin Adams was then hired as the pianist and choir director. It was good to again hear the piano being played after it had long sat idle through the COVID pandemic.

A Period of Conflict

In 2013-2014, soon after the congregation called Rev. Onnie and moved her from contract minister to full-time settled status, there was a period of conflict within the congregation.

The humanist group gathered in the garden to share their connection with a member of the group who had recently died. The minister was unhappy that she had not been consulted about or included in this event.

A few members of the humanist group did not refrain from making continuous, negative, sometimes untrue remarks about the direction of the congregation and about the minister. One particular member was vitriolic in his comments.

Another member of the humanist group wrote a letter of complaint to the congregation and spoke negatively about two of the congregation's lay leaders to others in the congregation. This person and their spouse met with leaders of a Right Relations Team. What seemed to be a satisfactory conclusion was reached. The couple was asked to take a break from the congregation, and some healing began.

A number of people from the humanist group left the congregation and formed a Humanist Group in The Villages. **Not all of the members of the humanist group left TriUU and not all were involved in the conflict.**

There was a completely unrelated incident that sometimes gets conflated in congregational memory with "the humanist conflict." A person who exhibited inappropriate behavior related to mental illness began attending congregational events. On one occasion he interrupted the minister, who was speaking at a Sunday morning forum, by yelling epithets at her. He refused to relinquish the microphone and was escorted out of the building by the president of the congregation and several backup volunteers. He was told not to return and later that same message was sent to him in a Registered Letter, which he refused to receive. Law enforcement was summoned and arrived after he had left the property. Some congregants were very upset by this incident. The man's threats to the president were verbal only and the absence of any physical contact made a Restraining Order impossible to obtain.

Through these events the congregation developed its Covenant of Right Relations and its Right Relations Committee formed, acted, and developed resources.

This time is sometimes remembered as the Humanist Controversy in which all the humanists left the congregation. This is an unfair characterization as a good number of people who identify as humanist remained in and were thereafter welcomed into the congregation.

A Name Change

At the congregational meeting in March 2017, the congregation voted to change the name from Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County to Tri-County Unitarian Universalists to reflect membership from all three of the central Florida counties (Lake, Sumter, and Marion) and the changed nature of the community from the fellowship model.

Other Notes of Significance

Congregation member Jim O'Hara was appointed by the congregation to be their representative to the Northeast Cluster. While serving in this position Jim was asked to represent the Cluster on the Florida District Board. In 1987 he became the District President.

In January 2015 Tri-UU (UUFMC) was the first church in Florida to perform same-sex marriages.