

Our History

In early October 1986 ads placed by Kathy Adler appeared in the St. Thomas Daily News looking for people interested in forming a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship for St. Thomas – St. John. On October 18th, nine people met at the Adler's home and the next day, Sunday, the first service was held at The Point restaurant in Frenchtown. This location became unavailable, so the next week the service was held at the Villa Olga where meetings continued to be held through June of 1987. We met on a sun deck with a partial awning, where there was a pretty view over the water, very little interruption, and occasionally not enough shade.

Eleven people signed the new membership book on November 23, 1986, of whom only three are still in the islands, Charlotte Fish, Ken Damon, and Sylvia Weaver.

We had a first Thanksgiving get-together with twenty-five members and friends at Rico Thunder's Restaurant at the bottom of Cassi Hill on St. Thomas, and a Christmas pot luck with ten at Ken and Sylvia's home on St. John.

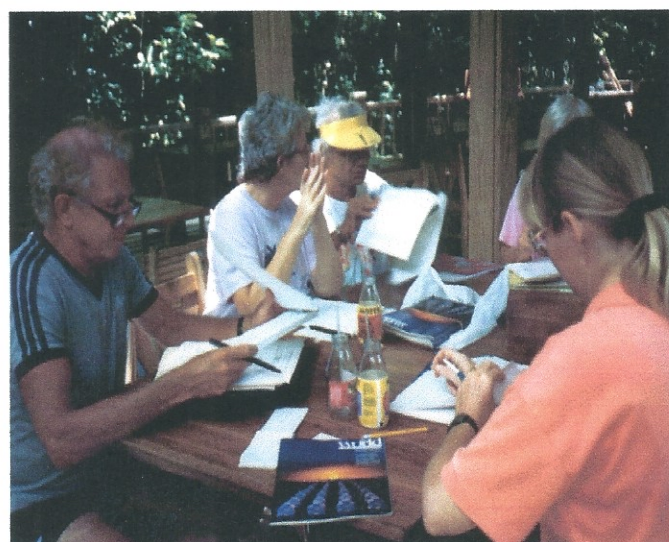
As of 2/1/87 we had 15 members

Later in February we had a visit from Tom Chulak, sent to us by the UUA to give guidance for new congregations. Carl Peterson and Marcia Forbes of the six-month-old St. Croix Fellowship came to St. Thomas to attend. On March 8, 1987 there was the first election of officers:

Coordinator- Kathleen Adler
Program – Charlotte Fish
Newsletter – Sylvia Weaver
Financial Director – Bob Adler
Public Relations – Ken Damon

In those days there was the potential for a Caribbean Cluster (three or more closely situated congregations), and from May 22 to 25 we hosted a campout at Cinnamon Bay Campground for St. Thomas-St. John, St. Croix, and Puerto Rico. The UUA sent Mary Smithwick from the Florida District newsletter and Roger Comstock to advise and help us run some workshops. Tom Townsend created a T-shirt logo. This was later modified for our banner, our directory, and sometimes our newsletter. We agreed to take the summer months of June, July, and August off, for lack of volunteers to present services. This is still true today.

In the fall of 1987 the Villa Olga changed owners and was no longer available. We were able to find a new home at the Tillett Gardens Upper Gallery for services every Sunday at 10:45 AM. Jim Tillett not only made the space available for a modest fee, but also joined our Fellowship. The location was in a pleasant jungle-like garden, which was much more suitable for services than the Villa Olga rooftop. A few members from the University of the V.I. community left us because they



felt the distance to travel was too great! We wanted to encourage attendance by young couples, so we started childcare during services. In October, our founding coordinator, Kathy Adler, and her husband, Bob, decided that they must leave the island and they appointed Sylvia Weaver as President pro-tem, and Fran Tonello as Treasurer. Our elections were held on 11/22/87, and which time By-laws were unanimously approved by 9 attending members. The result of elections:

- President – Sylvia Weaver
- VP – Tom Lawrence
- Treasurer – Francis Tonello, replace in June by Joan Lawrence
- Secretary and Newsletter – Virginia Thorn-Thwaite
- Program – Charlotte Fish



As of 2/1/88 we had 18 members

Tom Lawrence, Ruby Nelthropp, and Sylvia Weaver submitted Articles of Incorporation to the V.I. government in August of 1988. In September the Fellowship acquired its own mailing address at Suite 237 Red Hook Plaza, St. Thomas, VI 00802. November elections brought a few changes:

- President- Sylvia Weaver
- VP – Craig Barshinger
- Treasurer – Joan Lawrence
- Secretary – Kristi Rasmussen
- Newsletter – Craig Barshinger
- Program – Ken Damon

As of 2/1/89 we had 25 members

We inquired early in the year about the status of our incorporation, and found that the government had lost our papers. We resubmitted them, and in April 1989 received our acceptance from the Lieutenant Governor's office.



On the 22nd of that month we were accepted into the UUA.

In July of 1989 Ruby Nelthropp, Ken Damon, and Sylvia Weaver went off to Leadership School at The Mountain in North Carolina, and came back fired up with inspiration. This encouraged us in the future to budget funds to help send others off to similar functions.

Hurricane Hugo, in September, only affected us in minor ways, but cause devastating damage to St. Croix, including the homes and businesses of many members of our sister Fellowship.

Most of the St. John members, who were increasing in numbers, were somewhat disgruntled about always having to come to St. Thomas for services. The Executive Committee decided to attempt a Moveable Church, with the 1st and 3rd Sundays on St. Thomas at Tillett Gardens, where we were now using the tables and chairs of El Papagayo Restaurant; and the 2nd and 4th Sundays at Pine Peace

Community Room on Giffit Hill Road on St. John. In those months with a 5th Sunday, we enjoyed a beach picnic or other gathering. We offered child care on both islands – in the compound garden on St. Thomas and in the nursery room of the school, or lower porch, on St. John. Each week the candle that served as a chalice, about 20 small green pamphlet size hymnals, the collection basket, the name tags, the latest extra newsletters, and the programs for the service were carried to the proper place. At the Annual Meeting in November, elections resulted as follows:

President – Craig Barshinger
VP – Nancy Liburd, replaced in Jan.'90 by Ron Morisette
Secretary – Kristi Rasmussen, left islands 1/90, replaced by Judy Steiger
Treasurer – Capp Yess
Program – Ken Damon
News – Sylvia Weaver
Hospitality – Audrey Hedberg

As of 2/1/90 we had 26 members

Craig Barshinger and Ron Morisette attended Leadership School at The Mountain in July of 1990, assisted by a stipend from the Fellowship. In the Fall, the Moveable Church continued. From the start, the problem of accompaniment to our singing bothered us. We had occasional periods with a live musician to accompany our singing, but the cost was out of proportion to our budget. This year we prevailed upon Hayward Mickens, a fine musician, to make a tape accompaniment to all the hymns we used, which we could play as needed. We bought 20 chairs for the Pine Peace School in lieu of rent. Once again we had elections at our November Annual Meeting:

President – Craig Barshinger
VP – Ron Morrisette, replaced by
Audrey Hedberg when he left the V.I.
Secretary – Judy Steiger
Treasurer – Capp Yess
Program – Ken Damon & Dean Hedberg
News & PR – Sylvia Weaver

We had been talking for some time about having one of our members recognized by the UUA and the Virgin Islands government as a lay minister to officiate at the ceremonies that mark life's major transitions: dedications, weddings, and memorial services in particular. The UUA had agreed to issue an ordination form that would be satisfactory to the government, so on December 9, 1990, Craig was elected to be our first lay minister.

As of 2/1/91 we had 24 members.



One of our visiting ministers had been the Rev. Dr. Richard Gilbert from Rochester, NY, the author of the program "We Believe, Building Your Own Theology", and this spring we offered it as our first effort in adult Religious Education. It was very well received and all agreed it should be offered again, starting earlier in the year so our snowbirds could take part. We also produced a brochure for our Fellowship, mostly due to the efforts of Craig Barshinger.

The UUA General Assembly was held in Hollywood, FL in 1991, and Craig, Ken Damon, and Sylvia Weaver attended. Craig carried our new banner in the parade.

Fall 1991 saw the start of a true program of religious education instruction taught by Craig on St. John every 2nd and 45th Sunday, still complemented by child care for toddlers. In November we started a course of "We Believe II" and were able to include some of our winter visitors. Our annual elections gave us the following officers:

- President – Capp Yess, left for a new Job in June '92
- VP – Audrey Hedberg, became acting President. Ken became acting VP
- Secretary – Judy Steiger, left March '92
Replaced by Linda Sorensen
- Treasurer – Sylvia Weaver
- Program – Dean Hedberg
- News – Cynthia Quast
- RE – Craig Barshinger



As of 2/1/92 we had 27 members

For some time we had been finding more St. John members at services on St. Thomas than there were St. Thomas members, and many more people attended St. John services than St. Thomas services. On April 2, 1992, at a Special Meeting, we voted to discontinue meeting on St. Thomas and meet solely on St. John from that date on. There was only 1 nay vote and all the St. Thomas and St. John members were polled. We also amended the By-laws to change the hour of service from 10:45 to 9:45 AM, and the Annual Meeting date to any Sunday in November.

We were greatly honored by a visit from William Schulz, President of the UUA, in May. Originally it was planned that he should meet with the Governor and have press releases etc. to help make our denomination better recognized, but Government House did not cooperate.

In June of 1992, Audrey and Dean Hedberg represented us at GA in Calgary, Alberta, and in July Cynthia Quast went to Leadership School at The Mountain. Also in July, we held a Special Meeting to make minor changes in the By-laws to meet IRS requirements for tax exempt status. Our exemption papers cleared shortly thereafter.



The Annual Meeting of 1992 defined a Social Action Position: Any member can bring up a cause and ask to have a special collection taken immediately following the regular Fellowship collection, usually in the week following the original request. The proceeds will be sent to the appropriate agency in the name of "members of the UUF of St. Thomas –St. John". Election results were:

- President – Dean Hedberg
- VP – Ken Damon
- Secretary – Linda Sorensen, replaced in June by Alex and Dottie Politis
- Treasurer – Sylvia Weaver
- Program – Cynthia Quast
- News – Dorothy Muilenberg
- RE – Craig Barshinger

As of 2/1/93 we had 26 members

In this month we commissioned Thatcher Lord, a skilled local woodworker, to build a lectern with a beautiful carving of the flaming chalice on its face. The lectern was to be used by the Pine Peace School, as well as for our services. This was presented to the school in lieu of rent, with the understanding that if the day came when we moved to our own quarters, we would buy it back from them for the amount of the rent - \$975.

On Memorial Day weekend, we once again hosted the St. Croix Fellowship at Cinnamon Bay Campground and Pine Peace Community Room with workshops and pot-luck parties. It was a pleasure to be with them.

In 1993 GA was in Fort Worth, TX and Ken and Sylvia were able to go. They came home full of inspiration, as did Linda Sorensen and Allen Glenn who went to Leadership School at The Mountain.

Craig resigned as lay-minister in October. Sylvia Weaver was presented to the UUA by the Executive Committee as a new candidate for the lay ministry. At the November Annual Meeting the By-laws were amended to make the RE Director a position appointed by the President; St. John P.O. Box 751 became our official address, Sylvia was elected to the lay ministry, it was voted to buy 15 of the newly developed hymnals, "Singing the Living Tradition", and the following became officers:

President – Ken Damon
VP – Suki Buchalter
Secretary – Jim Luttrell
Treasurer – Cynthia Quast
Program – Sylvia Weaver
News – Dorothy Muilenberg
RE – Craig Barshinger

As a wonderful finale to 1993, Polly Guild came to St. John to be our minister-in-residence for two months from mid-December to mid-February. We held our first outdoor Christmas Carol singing at Peace Hill on Christmas Eve.

As of 2/1/94 we had 24 members

During March, April, May, and June we bought and installed 2 hot water tanks for Pine Peace School in lieu of rent. May saw the creation of a puppet show, "The Toymaker", stage included, for the Interfaith Coalition Fair of Faiths at the Tutu Mall. We used it on several later occasions to support other organizations fund-raisers.

Dorothy Muilenberg agreed 1 August to take over the RE for Craig until the end of the year so he could take a trial run in the political arena. It was voted to send a representative to the Interfaith Coalition monthly meetings. Cynthia and Sylvia became regular attendees and eventually Secretary and Treasurer of that organization. Our Fellowship officially joined the Coalition.



We offered instructional Sunday School every Sunday, with additional baby sitting for toddlers. Newly elected officers in November were:

President – Ken Damon
VP – Dean Hedberg
Secretary – Sylvia Weaver
Treasurer – Virginia Thomthwaite
Program – Cynthia Quast and
Linda Sorensen
News – Sylvia Weaver
RE – Dorothy Muilenberg

Once again we sang our Christmas Eve carols on Peace Hill. Unfortunately, a caroler fell and was injured. The Executive Committee agreed to find a different location for the following year, since the dirt path was difficult to navigate in the dusk.



As of 2/1/95 we had 22 members, the lowest number in many years; many of our most faithful members left the island in the two prior years due to job transfers or health problems and our new additions could not make up the difference. By Spring the Executive Committee was delighted to see the need to buy 10 more hymnals.

We held a Special Meeting in May 1995 to change our fiscal year to the calendar year, starting on January 1, 1996 with the Annual Meeting to be held in January. Later that month, on the Memorial Day weekend, the St. Croix Fellowship hosted workshops and parties with and for us. We all felt that the connection strengthened both Fellowships, and regretted that the travel cost made getting together so rare.

Our little world blew apart in September with Hurricane Marilyn. Many of our members suffered serious damages to their homes and/or businesses, and some were astonished to have escaped with their lives. We held our first post-hurricane service on the first Sunday after the roads were opened, not knowing whether anyone would come. We had the largest attendance we had had in months. There was a deep need to be together.

The Rev. Richard Speck flew his plane down from Vero Beach, FL, with two other volunteers to help repair our damaged roof. The Florida District sent gratefully received relief money and a Special Meeting of the congregation made the necessary decisions about dividing it among the neediest.

The Christmas 1995 carols were part of a full Christmas pageant at the Annaberg plantation ruins, complete with donkey, baby, and a suspiciously canine looking sheep. About 50 guests attended and it was well received.

1996 saw the first January Annual Meeting in the Pine Peace Community Room with elections:

President – Ken Damon
VP – Catherine Fahy
Secretary – Jim Luttrell
Treasurer – Allen Glenn

Program – Cynthia Quast and Linda Sorensen

News – Sylvia Weaver

RE – Cheryl Miller

***The by-laws were waived to permit these officers a third year in the same office**

We thought we had an amendment prepared for the Annual meeting, but found it was incorrectly worded, so on January 28, 1996 a Special Meeting was held where we voted to increase the number of the Executive Committee by two more members without portfolio. At the time there was no one available to take either position, but it was felt that this would permit a training experience with the committee which could broaden the understanding of the membership.

As of 2/1/96 we had 23 members.

We arranged for a telephone listing of our own, courtesy of Connections of St. John, for the next year. A non-member St. John family lost their home in a disastrous fire and our special collection was added to the island-wide support to help them. Our children put together a Valentine dinner dance for the adult members in order to raise funds for a trip to Virgin Gorda. In March we had our first on-island congregational wedding. Allen Glenn married Linda Sorensen, with Craig Barshinger officiating. We introduced new covers for the Sunday service programs, with our Aims and Purposes printed on the back along with membership information.

Christmas was saddened by the first death in the congregation. Jim Luttrell's memorial service in February was officiated by Sylvia Weaver.

In January of 1997 we started a young Teen Group which was active throughout the year with 12 to 14 members, many from outside the congregation. Our Annual Meeting elections result :

President – Cynthia Quast

VP – Catherine Fahy

Secretary – Nancy Helfrich

Treasurer – Allen Glenn (absence after Sept. filled by Sylvia Weaver)

Program – Craig Barshinger

News – Suki Buchalter

RE – Rosemond Dane

W/O Portfolio - Cheryl Miller and Jim Hanna

As of 2/1/97 we had 23 members

We tried to start an Across the Water program with the St. Croix Fellowship. Lis Wilson came to St. John in March, and we sent someone to St. Croix in April, but we were not successful in keeping this exchange going regularly for lack of money and candidates willing to serve. In October, the St. Croix Fellowship came to us for workshops and socializing. Earlier in the fall, Linda Sorensen and Allen Glenn left for India to adopt a little daughter, Anjali. Our annual Christmas carol sing was at Maho Bay Pavilion.

The Executive Committee established a policy of a one-month waiting period after applying for membership, because we had experienced that individuals rush to join at the time of the Annual Meeting excitement, and then fail to carry through later. The initiation period was to be followed by an introduction to the congregation at a welcoming ritual. Our January 1998 elections resulted in:



President – Cynthia Quast
VP – Kate O’Neal
Secretary – Nancy Helfrich
Treasurer – Sylvia Weaver
Program – Catherine Fahy
News – Suki Buchalter
W/O Portfolio – Ken Damon

As of 2/1/98 we had 27 members

In April of 1998 the Florida District granted us funds to send Rosemond Dane to the District RE Conference. In May we had a table at Earth Day in the Park to sell Flamboyant tree seedlings to raise a little money and mostly to put our name in front of the public. Later this month, Sylvia Weaver resigned as one of our representatives to the Interfaith Coalition. The trip to meetings was too long, (involving six hours) and difficult since there was no longer an evening downtown ferry.

At the close of the season, there was a strong desire expressed not to be out of touch for the entire summer. We agreed to have a July gathering with a short service and a pool party at Ken Damon’s rental house, Satinwood. It was well attended. In August, Kate O’Neal went to Leadership School in the Rocky Mountain District.

Plans in the Fall of 1998 by the RE Committee determined that we could offer one Sunday per month of instruction prepared by Rosemond Dane, with child care available on the other Sundays. The Teen Group would meet twice per month under Suki budhalter who would serve as a co-chair with Rosemond. The co-chairs would each receive \$100 per month and the child care assistants would each receive \$15 per Sunday. Jessica Buchalter and Martina Scimeca agreed to handle the child care. In November these two teenage girls gave us a service which was a debate on abortion.



The Executive Committee agreed that the increasing amount being required each year as a Fair Share payment of dues to the UUA was not fair to small congregations. The Trustees of the UUA have stated that large congregations of over 500 need only pay 4% of their budget in dues, whereas we had been paying something between 8 and 10% each year, which is too much for us. It was agreed that a more reasonable amount for us would be approximately 5% of our budget.

Cynthia Quast resigned as representative to the Interfaith Coalition, but there was no response to requests for a new volunteer. We had our first New Member induction service, and another one within a few weeks. Our Teens took a kayak trip, which was a great success.

The Rev. Danielle Green visited us in December and presented a workshop following the service on Envisioning Our Community. We determined that we have a definite interest in securing a part-time minister and making long-term plans for our own building, and Danielle helped us to see that some of this might be possible sooner than we believed.

On December 3, 1998 Danielle Green led an evening workshop, Envisioning the Future We Want which was tremendously helpful. We recognized that we can afford \$12,000 a year, for at least 3 start-up years, of \$1000 per month on a short term basis, for someone who would preach twice monthly, participate in the Interfaith Coalition, help a bit with the program planning, and lead an occasional workshop.

Our annual Christmas carol sing was held in the courtyard at Mongoose Junction II, as a fall-back because the National Park area was a sea of mud. It turned out to be a perfect location as long as the local businesses are willing to have us there, and we will try to repeat it next year.

The 1999 Annual Meeting resulted in the following elected officers:

*President – Cynthia Quast

VP – Alex Politis

*Secretary – Nancy Helfrich

Treasurer – Sylvia Weaver

Program – Ken Damon

*News – Suki Buchalter was elected & Replaced shortly by Heidi Neale because Suki was carrying 2 offices with too much work

w/o portfolio –Tim Gibbud & KateO’Neal

RE Rosemond Dane and Suki Buchalter

* The By-laws were waived to permit these officers a 3rd year in the same office.



As of 2/1/99 we had 30 members

In February of 1999 the Rev. Richard Speck flew in again with the Rev. Mary Chulak Higgins, our District Executive, for services and workshops on the structure and guidelines of a Ministerial Search. As a result of their guidance, on February 28th we held a Special Meeting which authorized the search, budgeted funds for it, and elected a Nominating Committee to prepare a slate for a Search Committee.

On March 7th our first congregational dedication of children, Ben Gibbud and Anjali Glenn, was officiated by Sylvia Weaver. This was followed by a celebration beach picnic.

The Executive Committee was delighted to find that we needed to order 10 more hymnals, since 30 to 40 people have routinely attended our services.

Another Special Meeting on March 21st presented the Nominating Committee’s slate of Cynthia Quast, Melissa Gibbud, Sylvia Weaver, Nick Manolukas, and Craig Barshinger. The slate was unanimously accepted by the congregation.

We sent a representative to our first Florida District Assembly, who received a very warm welcome, learned many useful things, and made many helpful connections. It was clear that we should make every reasonable effort in the future to extend our connections to the District.

April 21, 1999 – SBW

