

A History of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Valdosta

The Unitarian Fellowship of Valdosta was organized in 1965 by Harold M. (Bud) Evans and Mary Louise DeWolf-Hurt. An organizational meeting was held at the Daniel Ashley Hotel with about 30 people, some of whom were members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, including Mr. Charles Leonard, who later served as newsletter editor for 25 years, and received the UU Unsung Hero award from the Florida District. Also instrumental in establishing the church in Valdosta were charter members Jim and Josette Ingram, who are still active in the congregation. Application for formal membership in the Unitarian Universalist Association was filed on December 12, 1965, with 14 charter members. The membership was accepted by UUA in early 1966.

The group met in the Women's Club Building, which was rented for Sunday services for the first few months. Later in 1966, the group met at the Daniel Ashley Hotel, then in member's homes or temporarily rented quarters at different locations. In August, 1969, the Fellowship rented a small building on Blanton Street, and meetings were held there until October, 1971, when a home at 210 Mary Street was purchased. The Fellowship was a lay-led congregation, with members conducting the services or inviting speakers from the area to provide topics for discussion.

Rev. Dr. Angie Theisen was the first minister to visit the pulpit of the Fellowship on a regular schedule. In Fall, 1981, the Fellowship officially employed its first minister, Dr. Richard Lee of Tallahassee, on a part-time basis, and Dr. Theisen also continued to visit once a month. The Fellowship also negotiated to purchase the old Catholic Church building on Ashley Street. Dr. Lee was officially ordained as a minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in 1982.

In February, 1982, the Fellowship moved to the building at 706 N. Ashley Street. The building was originally built in 1927 for the congregation of St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church. The exterior of the building was sandblasted and painted, a new roof was installed and broken windows were replaced. The interior of the building was renovated with church members doing most of the work, including refinishing all of the pews and floor. Upon acquiring the church building, the membership began to use the name of the "Unitarian Universalist Church of Valdosta."



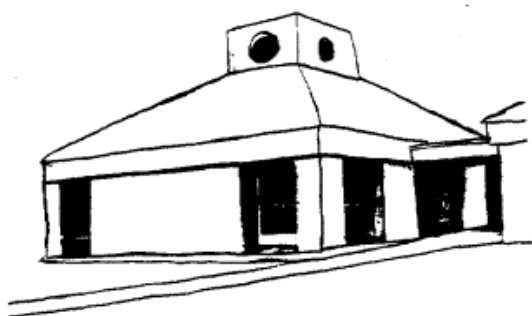
The move to Ashley Street, a busy street several blocks from the courthouse, made the church more visible to the public. Even though the church did not grow rapidly in numbers during this time, church members continued to be very active in the community, beginning participation in the Valdosta "Break Bread Together" program,

delivering meals to local citizens, and as one of the original participating churches in the Lowndes Associated Ministries to People (LAMP) program. In 1986, the church celebrated its 20th anniversary with a birthday party, attended by more than 50 members, former members and friends. An etched glass medallion to commemorate the event was designed by Richard Hill. Through this decade, ministers from Georgia and the Florida District visited once a month and the lay-led services continued. Jim Ingram designed the church's banner, and it was carried for the first time in the General Assembly parade in Atlanta.

Jack Ford, a UU ministerial intern sponsored by the Valdosta Church, served as minister from the fall of 1992-1999. He occupied the pulpit two Sundays of every month between September and May each year. Lay leaders conducted the services for the remaining Sundays, utilizing speakers from Valdosta State University and the local community. Members enjoyed many social events, including book discussions, potluck dinners, and camp-outs. It was during this time the church sponsored its first community Coffee House and the youth group organized a Valentine's Dance at the church. Individual members of the church have long been active in various social issues and service activities. This involvement extends to the organization as a whole, as members continue to participate in the "Break Bread Together" program, LAMP, and in the Habitat for Humanity project in Valdosta.

In December of 1995, the Fellowship purchased land at 1951 East Park Ave., (Lakeland Highway), Valdosta, GA. Under the capable guidance, encouragement, and architectural vision of Jim Ingram, a beautiful new facility in-the-woods became the home of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Valdosta (click [here](#) for photos!). Several activities were held on the site before the actual raising of the walls of the new church, including an Easter morning sunrise service, and a Native American sweat lodge ceremony led by Jack Ford. Many members donated their labor and talents as they participated in the finish work in the interior of the sanctuary, led by the considerable talents of Jack Ford.

The move to the new building took place in June, 1997, with Mary Louise DeWolf-Hurt as the inaugural speaker. The [dedication service](#) on September 21, 1997 included the founding members, Bud Evans and Mary Louise Dewolf-Hurt, as well as several long-time members, as speakers "Remembering the Past," while the Rev. Mary Higgins, Executive Director of the Florida District, gave the keynote address, "Empowering the Future."



Jack Ford completed his internship with the Valdosta church in May of 1999. After that time the church utilized lay leaders, community speakers, and once-a-month guest UU

ministers. After completing the requirements for ministry, Jack Ford was [ordained](#) in the church, on Dec. 8, 2001.

Rev. Al Boyce served the UU Church of Valdosta from 2002 - 2003. Rev. Boyce had served as UU minister with congregations in Miami, FL, and Plainfield, NJ. Rev. Barbara Child served as interim consulting minister from September 2004 to May 2005. As an interim minister for the UUA, Rev. Child has served a number of different congregations, and moved on to the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, after her time in Valdosta.

In September 2006, Rev. Jane Altman Page began as part-time minister at UU Valdosta. Rev. Page served UU Statesboro as half-time minister and traveled to UU Valdosta one weekend a month, serving until May 2009. During that time, Rev. George Bennett also served as speaker one Sunday a month. A native of Valdosta, Rev. Bennett has served both Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ congregations over the past forty years. Dr. Michael Stoltzfus, a Professor in Religious Studies at Valdosta State University, also began giving a message one Sunday each month and continues to do so (January 2014).

In September 2009, Rev. Fred Howard began serving as part-time minister. Rev. Howard gives the message two Sundays a month (usually first and third Sunday) and is active in the community, having served as president and on the board of the Valdosta Area Ministerial Association (VAMA). (Read a [biography](#) of Rev. Howard).

The congregation of the UU Church of Valdosta continues to be active in many social justice efforts in the Valdosta community, still participating in Break Bread meal deliveries each month, preparing a lunch for the Habitat for Humanity Building on Faith Blitz Build each year, and collecting clothing and food for immigrant workers in South Georgia. Each month, the congregation holds a Share-the-Plate Sunday, in which any contributions to the collection plate, not designated as pledge, are contributed to a different designated community organization.

The UU Church welcomes a number of community groups who use the church-in-the-woods as a place to gather: the KTD Buddhist Reading and Meditation Group, the Taoist Tai Chi group, Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and South Georgia Pride.

Updated January 2014 by Carol Stiles