

## ***Responding to the Call: Rebuild My Church***

*By All Faiths Unitarian Congregation Founding President, Joyce Ramay, in honor of Founding Minister, the Rev. Dr. Wayne Robinson – Founders' Day – February 19, 2023*

Today is a special day for celebration and joy. Twenty-two years ago, on February 19, 2001, something miraculous emerged here in beautiful southwest Florida. 98 of us met with Rev. Dr. Wayne Robinson to consider the possibility of forming a new congregation. 25 of us are still alive and members of All Faiths. Will those of you who were founding members please rise to be recognized and appreciated:

In 2000 we had been present at the heartbreaking session at UUCFM where a vote was held about retaining the services of Rev. Robinson. There were many speakers who either supported or opposed him. I often said that Wayne Robinson reminded me of some Old Testament Prophets – promoting justice and speaking truth to power. Throughout the ages, prophets have been abused and rejected. My late husband, Haneef Ramay, who had been a political leader in Pakistan, said that he had had chairs and tomatoes thrown at him, but never had he heard such vicious remarks as those made by some of the people who wanted to dismiss Rev. Robinson. Although a majority of the members voted to retain Rev. Robinson, the margin was small, and the presiding UUA representative recommended that it was not a sustainable situation for him to remain.

So Wayne resigned and went into exile – he took an interim minister's position at a UU congregation in Michigan for a year.

The first of our UUA Sources reads: “**Direct experience** of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” While Wayne was in Michigan, I believe he had one of those direct experiences. While he was there, I am sure that he heard the call – ***go back to Fort Myers, and rebuild my church.***

Some would claim it was his desire to prove that he was still wanted that motivated him. Those of us from the north could easily understand that it might have been the Michigan winter that elicited that call to return to sunny Florida. However, I firmly believe it was a blessed call from the *Spirit of Life*, like the one that St. Francis of Assisi heard – ***Rebuild My Church.*** I think it was a profound direct experience between Wayne and his oft cited *Mystery Before Which We All Stand.*

So on February 19<sup>th</sup> in 2001, 98 of us responded to the call to meet with Wayne to plan for the future. There was a tremendous surge of enthusiasm and what I can only call spiritual joy as we discussed all the possibilities. We recognized that this was a unique opportunity to create something that is much needed, particularly here in Florida – a congregation of inclusive and loving people, who would devote themselves to supporting each other, and making this a better world in whatever way that we could.

Together we chose our name **All Faiths**, because we acknowledged that we can receive spiritual insights and enlightenment from the many traditions recognized in the UUA Sources. “Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.”

We chose to be radically inclusive - embracing wisdom and inspiration that can be found in diverse religions and philosophies. Our founders included people from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim,

Hindu, Pagan, and Humanist traditions. We chose to identify ourselves as **Unitarian**, even though we knew that the Unitarian Universalist Association might not initially accept us. We chose **Congregation** rather than Church because the word “Church” is generally associated only with Christianity. So, it was a unanimous decision to become **All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**.

We decided to meet once a month initially to do our planning and organization when Wayne could join us while he fulfilled his one-year contract in Michigan. Another of the UUA Sources reads: “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.” As I mentioned earlier, I have often called Wayne Robinson our modern-day prophet. He led us through difficult times, pursuing truth and justice, without a home of our own.

Rabbi Bruce Diamond allowed us to hold our monthly meetings from March through August at Temple Beth El. Our original Board meetings were held at my dining room table. For a time, we were like nomads wandering from place to place, a little like Moses and the Israelites. In the fall, we rented space at Dunbar Middle School to begin weekly services.

Our first open service was held on the Sunday after the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. We had publicized that we were creating an interfaith type religious group, which appealed to some new people who came and joined. Those were challenging times in America. When there was a high degree of paranoia and Islamophobia, we offered an alternative of love, trust and inclusiveness.

We soon rented office space at the Alliance for the Arts, and then arranged to use their theatre on Sunday mornings. It was the perfect location for many of us to stand at the corner of McGregor and Colonial Boulevard with our signs opposing entry into the war in Iraq. Right from the start, we were visible and actively standing for Peace.

In 2006, we had to leave the Alliance theatre, and rented space at Crestwell School for our Sunday services. We struggled through the hard times of the 2008-2009 recession, when we had to cut back on expenses.

But in 2010, we located this building on McGregor Boulevard, and our people generously contributed the extra funds to make the purchase. The prior owners asked that we preserve the memorial garden with the statue of St. Francis, and we agreed. I could not help but think how appropriate it was to have St. Francis there, since Wayne Robinson resembled him in many ways. Here indeed was a contemporary challenge to rebuild and create something better than what had been before.

Like St. Francis, we made physical repairs to the building, but like him, we also recognized that our mission was much broader than that. We were called to create a family of people with diverse beliefs, talents, and viewpoints, who could listen to and learn from each other. We could become a model for inclusiveness and love in action by caring for ourselves and others.

Wayne gave a sermon called “*We Are Each Others’ Keepers*”. One of our members was so moved by that message that he donated \$10,000 for us to conduct a competition of artists to create an artwork for the front of the sanctuary. Three finalists presented their draft concepts and the congregation voted for this magnificent glass sculpture that was then created by Susan Gott. The design has also been reflected in our logo.

Consistent with that theme, we developed many social action teams who devote their faith, energy and love in action: Operation Joy, Racial Equity, Rainbow Connection, Heart for the Homeless, Climate Action, McGregor Clinic, Mano a Mano, and Animal Ministry. Many of our people through the years have been responding to the call for love in action to alleviate the pain and suffering of the world, and to provide uplift to those in need.

This is what building a church is all about. And it was all started and inspired by our beloved founding minister, Rev. Dr. Wayne Robinson.

It was particularly significant that Wayne's wife, Joyce Schaffer, saw the poor condition of the original statue of St. Francis, and then ordered the beautiful carved marble statue of St. Francis with the wolf that now presides over the lovely memorial garden. I believe that Francis would be glad to acknowledge that Wayne Robinson knows what rebuilding a church is all about.

Wayne heard the call, and he responded. Then he called us to join him, and we responded to his call.

It takes a community to make meaningful change, and Wayne has always worked to bring people together, just as he did when he helped to form Lee County Coming Together, to unite people of multiple faiths in encountering the racial and religious discriminations that exist here.

Wayne, we are proud to call you our friend, our mentor, our guide, and our activist prophet – seeking justice, speaking truth to power, and sharing the love, as we join together as each other's keepers. May it be so.

And now I invite Rev. Dr. Wayne Robinson to come forward to speak to us as we honor him today on this special occasion.