

Summary of Northwoods Church History (1975-2021)

The congregation was organized in 1975, and formally accepted into the Unitarian Universalist Association as a member church in June, 1978. The congregation size was fairly stable at 30-40 members under the leadership of founding members and (quarter time) minister, Reverend Dr. Van Vanstrom between 1978 and 1983. Beginning in 1983, the congregation experienced a substantial growth in membership, as well as financial support. This made it possible to increase professional ministerial leadership to half time; first Reverend Al Judd (1982-1985), and then Reverend Byron Miller (1985-1988).

The growth that the church experienced in 1984 was phenomenal, and there was reason to believe the membership would continue to grow driven by the ongoing oil boom in Houston. The congregation eventually believed they were in a position to purchase land and build a church in The Woodlands in 1985. The leadership took on \$200,000 in debt under the assumption of significant future growth. Unfortunately, the Houston oil boom went bust beginning in early 1986, resulting in a decrease in membership and a drop in pledges to support the budget. These events led to near bankruptcy in late 1990.

The early 1990s were characterized by limited membership growth, financial stagnation, and never ending fund raising activities. Fortunately, during this time we were favored by the steady leadership of church members and our first full time Settled Minister, Reverend Don Vaughn-Foerster. The Houston economy began to expand again in the mid-1990's; and along with that came new growth in the congregation and an optimism not seen in over a decade. By 2000, the congregation had managed to raise nearly \$100,000 through fundraising and a capital campaign which allowed leadership to restructure the debt. This enabled the congregation to actually afford the loan payments on the building for the first time since it was built.

In early 2001 Reverend Don Vaughn-Foerster resigned as Northwoods minister after 12 years. He then entered the Interim Ministry program and continued to serve Unitarian Universalist churches around the country. The Board of Trustees approved the call of Reverend Paula Gable to the position of Interim Minister, and she served Northwoods from February, 2002 until July, 2003.

The church continued to prosper and grow, and by January 2003 the congregation had established two services to make room for all of the new people; however, lack of parking space remained a major problem. The congregation called Reverend Danita Noland in 2003 as the second Settled Minister, and celebrated its 25th Anniversary as a congregation.

Continued growth resulted in the addition of numerous program enhancements, such as the Welcoming Congregation, efforts to financially support organizations outside the church, revisions to the bylaws, and financial success. The leadership created a Long Range Plan to prepare for the time when the congregation would outgrow the building.

The congregation was optimistic about the future and believed most of the congregations' previous problems were behind them.

This optimistic view of the future was shattered in 2006 when Reverend Danita Noland resigned. Reverend Noland had seemed to be a good match for the congregation. She was young with children of her own, like many of the members; she was a social activist who appealed to the congregation; and she came with fresh ideas to encourage continued growth of the church. Her departure was difficult for many in the congregation who felt let down and disappointed. She reached her decision following a particularly difficult year for her personally, and determined that resigning would be best for her and her family.

The congregation managed to survive the sudden loss of the minister, but the experience took an emotional toll on many members. Membership, however, continued to grow, and with growth came an increase in annual budgets which supported additional programming for the congregation. Church leadership agreed to call an Interim Minister, and Reverend Benjamin Maucere served as the minister from January 2007 to August 2008.

The membership celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the congregation in June 2008. The next phase in the life of the congregation began in 2008 with the calling of Reverend Ellen Cooper-Davis as the third Settled Minister. The congregation continued to add additional programs to support membership growth, and by the end of 2008 the church building was bulging at the seams. Church leadership began several new projects, such as "Journey 2014", and the "Making Room for Everybody" Task Force to find solutions to sanctuary and parking lot space problems.

A considerable amount of effort was spent at this time on developing Core Values, and Mission and Vision statements. The leadership created a new organizational structure with a Committee on Ministry that replaced the previous Program Council and modified the bylaws to reflect this. This organizational structure was oriented toward a large program church model which leadership felt was needed to support the growing membership. Membership reached a peak of 226 in 2012. In retrospect, 2012 turned out to be a high point of the congregation's first forty years. The church hired a full time Director of Lifespan Faith Development at the end of 2012. The congregation was also reaching out to the larger community by funding charitable works through the Millbend Coffeehouse, Arts in Action, the Share the Plate program, the GLBQT Prom, and the Northwoods Rummage Sale. Everything at Northwoods seemed to be going well, and the future looked bright.

But all was not well with the financial health of the congregation between 2008 and 2012. The 2009 Pledge Drive was disappointing and only a special "Fill the Gap" fund drive allowed the church to stay the course in program activities. Then again in 2010 the pledge failed to meet expectations. In order to balance the budget, savings were used to pay off the mortgage, thereby freeing up cash flow to meet spending requirements. It is important to note that at this same time, the country was being

affected by the “Great Recession”. Northwoods was not immune to this disastrous economic event; some members left the congregation due to lost jobs, and others experienced a significant loss of income.

The congregation finally managed to reach deep and fully fund the church budget in 2012 with the most successful Pledge Drive in church history to that date. At the same time an effort by the church leadership called “Next Steps” was undertaken to solve the continuing space problem. Interestingly this work turned up a significant weakness not related to space issues.

Reverend Ellen Cooper-Davis departed for a six month sabbatical in 2014. Reverend Cooper returned from sabbatical at the end of August, but there ensued several tumultuous weeks in September and October due to her bout with depression. Eventually the church leadership was forced to reach a negotiated resignation with Reverend Cooper which was accepted by the congregation in January 2015.

In the spring of 2015 there was another disappointing Pledge Drive resulting in elimination of the Director of Lifespan Faith Development position. There was considerable anxiety within the congregation about the future of the church at this time. This year, 2015, in retrospect was probably the low point of the congregation's first forty years; equally as distressing as 1990 the year Northwoods nearly went bankrupt.

Leadership decided the congregation needed an Interim Minister to begin a process of healing and rebuilding. Reverend Donna Renfro was called as an Interim Minister by church leadership in the fall of 2015. Northwoods members and leadership, with the help of Reverend Renfro, began to address some of the underlying problems within the congregation at that time.

A new Covenant of Right Relations was put in place in early 2016. The bylaws were changed to remedy a structural organization problem between the Board of Trustees and the Committee on Ministry. And a successful Pledge Drive occurred in the spring of 2016. Encouragingly, during this entire process, the congregation still managed to continue reaching out to the larger community by funding charitable works through the Millbend Coffeehouse, Avant Garden Gallery, Arts in Action, Share the Plate, and the Northwoods Rummage Sale.

Even with all of the apparent success in 2016, church membership continued to fall (down to 176), and the leadership found it prudent to return to one Sunday service starting in January 2017. The last time Northwoods had one Sunday service was in 2002 when the membership was about 150.

The congregational meeting held at the end of May 2017 approved a new Mission Statement. And in the spring of 2018 at the annual meeting the congregation adopted a set of Core Values and a Vision Statement.

“The Last Best Pledge Drive” was created to replace the old model of yearly requests for pledges from the members of the church. In future years each member's pledge would be automatically renewed with an inflation adjustment. The church received pledge support higher than budgeted by the Board so the congregation appeared to have finally moved beyond a scarcity and poverty budget that just covered the bare minimum of staff and resources. The Pledge Drive in the following year was equally successful.

The ongoing efforts of Northwoods leadership and Reverend Renfro appeared to have turned the fortunes of the congregation around by the end of 2017. And the congregation took a small step forward by hiring a part time Coordinator of Religious Exploration.

The Northwoods' Board of Trustees voted in May 2018 to approve the recommendation of the Ministerial Search Team and offered the job of Developmental Minister to Reverend Sarah Prickett. Sarah accepted the offer and planned to begin serving our congregation in August 2018.

The congregation approved becoming a Sanctuary Church at its May 19, 2019 Annual Meeting. The Sanctuary Movement is a growing movement of faith and immigrant communities protecting and standing with immigrants facing deportation. Members pledge to protect immigrant families who face unjust deportation. Northwoods Unitarian Universalist Church joins the many religious leaders, congregations, and faith-based organizations of all denominations who are part of the Movement.

In March 2020 Reverend Sarah Prickett announced that starting March 15, 2020 and continuing forward, the Church would offer a worship program online for the Northwoods community, using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. “We are a creative, agile faith community, and I know we can rise to the challenge of sustaining our connections in innovative ways. We will continue to monitor recommendations by public health officials and the UUA about how long in-person worship and other gatherings will be suspended and will keep you informed every step of the way.”

Over the course of the previous week, church leadership had closely monitored the spread of the coronavirus. As a community, we were called to put the needs of the most vulnerable at the center of our decision-making process. In this case, “the vulnerable” constitutes a rather large group, including those over age 65, those with pre-existing conditions such as heart disease, respiratory conditions and diabetes, and those with compromised immune systems. With that in mind, the board and Reverend Prickett made the decision to suspend in-person worship and move our gathering online. This decision was backed up by the UUA, who sent out an email urging congregations to “avoid gatherings of more than 25 people, including worship and religious education, for the time being.”

In April of 2020 the Welcoming Congregation Team announced that we have successfully completed the Five Practices of Welcome Renewal for 2020. For 17 years we have been committed to LGBTQ+ welcome and inclusion in and beyond the

Woodlands. In 2003, we became a welcoming congregation, and since then we have continued to work to ensure we are meeting the needs of queer and trans congregants and friends in the following ways: Welcoming in worship, welcoming days of observance, offering Adult Forum on the ABC's of human sexuality, and participating in the second annual Woodlands Pride event.

In February 2021 Reverend Prickett noted that it had been almost exactly two and a half years since she led her first worship service at Northwoods as our minister. This was a significant milestone because she is currently serving as our developmental minister in a five-year contract, which means this marks the exact middle of our ministry together. She is a contract minister, not a settled minister. This means that the leadership of Northwoods and Reverend Prickett have agreed that she will serve as our minister for a specific period of time. At the midpoint of the five years of developmental ministry, Northwoods' leadership is tasked with reviewing and assessing our goals, and deciding which goals need to be changed, revised, clarified and identify a new set of goals for the remainder of our shared developmental ministry.

Sunday October 3, 2021 marked the first time in a year and a half that folks were invited into the Northwoods sanctuary to attend worship as well as via Zoom. Attendance was capped for worship, and people needed to sign up for the services they wish to attend in person. This limited the number of people in the building at any given moment, and allowed for thorough contact tracing in the unfortunate (but not impossible) event that someone attended worship and then tested positive for COVID-19. While in the building, attendees were required to wear masks at all times, with the exception of worship leaders while they were speaking or singing.

The Board of Trustees announced the results of the congregational meeting on November 14, 2021 when the members of the church elected five members to the Call/Search Committee. The next step is that the Board of Trustees will select two additional candidates to the Call/Search committee. Once the selected candidates have accepted the position they will be announced to the Congregation. Then the real work of the committee can start. The first task of the committee will be to determine if an inside candidate (for example Rev Sarah Prickett) is the best fit for our congregation, with input from the congregation.