



Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation



OUR STORY OUR JOURNEY 1963-2021





In the Beginning

Between 1963 and 1965, a few Tempe UUs began meeting at the Village Inn Pizza parlor located at Rural Road and Apache Boulevard on Sunday mornings for (of course!) a discussion group.

Rev. Ray Manker of UUCP “mentored” the group as they formed a new congregation. Rev. Lester Mondale (Walter Mondale’s brother) served as ‘interim’ until being chartered by the UUA in 1965.





Milestones on our Journey

- The first church building was acquired at 1016 S. River Drive, northeast of Apache and McClintock. Referred to it as River “Road.”
- By 1967 there were 60 members. Rev. Jesse Roberson was the Extension Minister and then called as the Settled Minister.
- In 1980, a group of members formed an investment group and purchased a property on Warner Road in Chandler.





River Road, 1967





River Drive Years

Rev. Roberson served from 1967-1970

Rev. Jeremy Brigham served VUU from 1970-1976

Rev. Art Hover served VUU from 1976-1978

1969 - **JoAnne Smith** came to VUU with her husband for counseling with Jesse Roberson. A short time after she met Jesse, though, he resigned because there was not enough money to pay him. “It was a very old building with a parking lot sprouting weeds,” but she remembers artwork on the walls, which appealed to her.





River Road Years

1973 - **Debbie Dinyes** recounts, “I found my way to the church on River Road, a very modest building with a gravel parking lot. Well, modest doesn’t quite describe it. However buildings are containers for people, and I was looking for people. The person I found was Rev Jeremy Brigham, who I knew from college!



I was used to a rather formal church with pews and a choir loft with an organ. River Road was sort of an enlarged house with folding chairs. But oh, the people! They were wonderful. I would have stayed if it was in a tent.”





From 1979 through 1984 VUU was a 'Fellowship' which means an entirely lay led congregation.

Toby Aickin: “My brother went to Sunday school, my mom attended the formal services, and I met with the junior high/high school youth group. After the first half-hour, I knew this was what I wanted. For the first time in my life, I did not have to feel out of my element when I was out of my house.”

DiAnna Farmer (1980) “I have to say that my daughter constantly says that it was the older powerful women in our church that have always been an inspiration to her and her strength. You never know who you're going to impress or what you're going to send out there. I know that none of those women knew that they were going to impress a 9 year old little girl but she certainly cares for other people in that way.”





Warner Road Construction

Rev. Scotty Meek was interim 1984-1985 when VUU moved to Warner Rd.

Rev. Jim Norman served VUU from 1986-1994.

Rev. Scotty Meek in front of Warner Rd during construction. JoAnne Smith was very active in planning the Warner Road facility, where the congregation grew, and soon needed two services and two RE sessions.



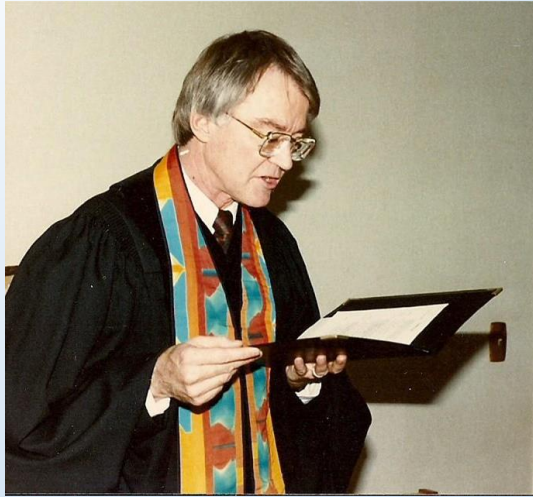


Warner Road Years 1984-2002

VUU grew at Warner Road, needing expansion, Building B, which required a second mortgage.

Mary Rothschild: Miracle Sunday - “To our surprise, we did raise enough money to pay off the mortgage for the RE Building (Building B) in a one-day celebration, which really did seem like a miracle. Alas, I can't remember what the amount was, but it sticks in my mind it was maybe around \$45,000!”





Jim read a story to the children at each Sunday service. Sabena (who is still part of VUU) made annual Christmas ornaments for each child.

Mary Rothschild continues: “My son and Jim Norman had many good talks about lots of things, made a lifelong connection, and Jim taught him to drive extremely well. Further, none of us needed psychotropic drugs to get through it. I’m still grateful for Jim’s kind and loving intervention.”

Judith Harper: Came to VUU when Jim Norman was minister, meeting with him in order to become a member. He insisted that becoming a member of the Silent Auction Committee was a prerequisite to becoming a member of VUU. She loved the hymns; the new hymnal had just been published.





Janet Cantley: “When our children were in their ‘tweens, the Religious Education program started a social group called MUUGs, Middle School UU Group, in the first decade of 2000s.”

In 1991, **Kellie Walker**, and her young family joined our congregation. Kellie immediately volunteered to work with our music program, ultimately transforming it and becoming a fixture in the congregation.





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Karen Stucke - "I came in 1994. Lex Crane was the Interim Minister. I remember when I felt really welcomed: Someone in the church made some derogatory comment about renters, and I was a renter of the time. MariLou Coy stood up and said that that comment was inappropriate."





In 1995, having overcome many of our financial problems, VUU began a period of deep spiritual growth and community under the ministry and guidance of Rev. James Ishmael Ford, (1995 to 2000) who introduced Buddhist worship and meditation.

Several long-time congregants remember how much they love(d) Rev James Ford. One described his help during a family crisis, when he reassured them that he would listen to their concerns "like a Dutch Uncle" and reflect his honest insights into their situation.

(Pictured with Charlotte Ward)





Mary Erickson: “I had a virtual sticky note on my computer for 11 years to remind myself to try a UU church before I finally decided to give it a try. I asked my colleague Janice Pittsley if I might come with her to service on Warner Road. I had just one burning question: what shall I wear? One visit and I was hooked. VUU services made me



The **Melameds**, whose background was Jewish, were pleased to find VUU as a multicultural place where their teens could attend Coming of Age and sexuality programs.





Roberta Baker: (1998) remember visiting Warner Road on Christmas Eve. Ken St. John made her and her friend feel very welcome, and she knew she had found her new home.



Mary Rothschild: “My son Sasha came out to me that he was gay just before Christmas one year. I was a mess, desperately worried that people would that he would no longer be accepted for the lovely person S was.

Then I came to VUU the Sunday before Christmas. Nancy Nielsen got up and introduced her parents and her sister and her sister’s life partner and our whole community chorused, “Welcome!” and the muscles in my neck, as hard as bricks for three days, relaxed.





On the Way to Del Rio, 2002-2004



By 2001 it was clear that the Warner building was too small for our needs and a search committee was formed. Under the leadership of board president Debbie Dinyes, committee members Mary Rothchild and Todd Heglund and members Jill and Dan Garvey, our current location was located and secured.



Rev. Linda Bunyard served as interim after James Ford left. The **Rev. Lone Jensen** came to VUU in the summer of 2001. Within three weeks of taking the pulpit at Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, though 9/11 plunged the nation into mourning and took our congregation with it.

She tended to the growth of our congregation – both in the sheer number of members, as well as the administrative approach needed to effectively oversee a mid-size program church.





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We moved from Warner Road to Del Rio in 2004, leaving our beloved, but cramped, property, saying goodbye to “Ol’ Man Warner” on January 22 with Rev. Lone’s personal touch – a jazz funeral parade - and took up residence in a more spacious facility.





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Our Del Rio Home





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Open the door and see all the VUU people





VUU is more than a place!

Rebecca Riggs: “After my son Eric’s suicide, the choir came forward to spontaneously plan a huge memorial service and reception.”

Tracey Greer came to VUU while fighting breast cancer. She needed RE for her kids; they participated in OWL and the service trips to Agua Prieta, Mexico.

DeeAnne McClenahan & Marci Beaudoin:

In 2010, a registered sex offender worked out arrangements with our minister to attend services, but always escorted by an approved chaperone.





Janet Cantley: “On a picnic at Tonto Natural Bridge, in 2014, our son found a particular young lady very attractive, someone who had been a part of the MUUG group. They began dating, long-distance, as she had moved to Indianapolis. They were able in a few years to be physically closer. In April 2020, after many planning pivots due to a global pandemic, they were married in our backyard.”



Jeanne Gerber: “In 2011, Gary, an interim minister, officiated at one of our daughters’ weddings. VUU felt like home immediately. Beautiful music, provocative sermons, friendly people. I became active in the Book Group. Because we lived so far out in the Valley, we did not come to the service as often as I would have liked.”





Jeanne Gerber - “Marilou Coy was probably the first person we met. Each time we would attend the service she welcomed us with hugs and smiles. It was great to be ‘seen’.”

Mary Rothschild - “Mary Lou was amazing.”



Debbe Simpkins -

“Have you been
Marilou’d?”

Rebecca Rigg -
“She was our entire
welcome program”





The “Bridge of Love,” a ‘passage’ that began for children, but grew up.





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Faith Formation is much more than Sunday School





Challenges: 2008 - 2010

The Financial Crisis of 2008 hurt VUU. Staff was cut, Rev. Jensen was reduced to part-time.

There was a crisis of trust when a member was accused of sexual assault.

After Rev. Jensen left, interim Rev. Gary Gallun recommended changes in several VUU practices, including that VUU ordain Kellie Walker for her long service to VUU.





Irene Rosenthal: “We came to VUU in the fall of 2001. After attending for a while, we started wondering why VUU was called a church since the word has Christian connotations and didn’t represent the diversity and inclusiveness of the congregation’s membership.

We started talking to people and asking why it needed to be called a ‘church.’ We even led a discussion group which was met with curiosity by some people and outright hostility by others. I actually received some very angry emails from a few long-term members, asking how I, as a newcomer, dared challenge this long-established name.

Since we changed the name, we’ve had people thank us for starting this process.

Growing in spirit
applies to
communities as
well as individuals.





At a congregational meeting in 2009 with many possibilities before us, we voted overwhelmingly to adopt our new name “Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation” which honors our history and makes us more inclusive.

And our new mission statement became “Love is our Doctrine, Service is our Prayer, Justice is Our Calling” for the first time emphasizing “Justice” as well as Love and Service.



On Valentine's Day 2010, worship associate Mary Rothschild ushered in a new degree of political activism at VUU, with a rousing service introducing the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign.





Rev. Andy Burnette

Andy was called to VUU in 2012, attracting many with his excellent sermons, his social activism, and his wonderful singing voice.

Claudette Wassil brought two "daughters" with her to the congregation whom she had sheltered from arranged child marriages. They loved hearing Kellie and Andy sing "The Healing Rain" during Sunday services, feeling like they had finally found a safe place to worship.

Jim Horton (2013) - I helped fulfill Andy's dream of a more audio-visual church.





Because of growth, VUU changed its governance, which started during Rev. Jensen's tenure. Here, a Leadership Council, comprised of staff, committee chairs, and ministry leaders, spends a Saturday morning planning and discussing what's next.

Haleigh Farrelly 2018: "I like UU words to older hymns. Home is what I think of when I think of VUU."





Jamila Pulliam - “One impactful memory of mine occurred a few years ago. A lady interrupted a service by coming in loudly, and wandering up and down the aisles. Rather than Reverend Andy stop the service due to the commotion, he kept speaking. At the same time, a few kind souls came to talk to her, offered her a seat, and went to the snack table and got a food plate for her. At the end of the service, I found out that she was a group home resident in the neighborhood, who occasionally snuck out of the house and came to church. Apparently, we help keep her safe when she visits, and then just call them and let them know that she's here. This radical hospitality is exactly what I believe a church should practice, and it makes me proud to be a Valley UU member!”



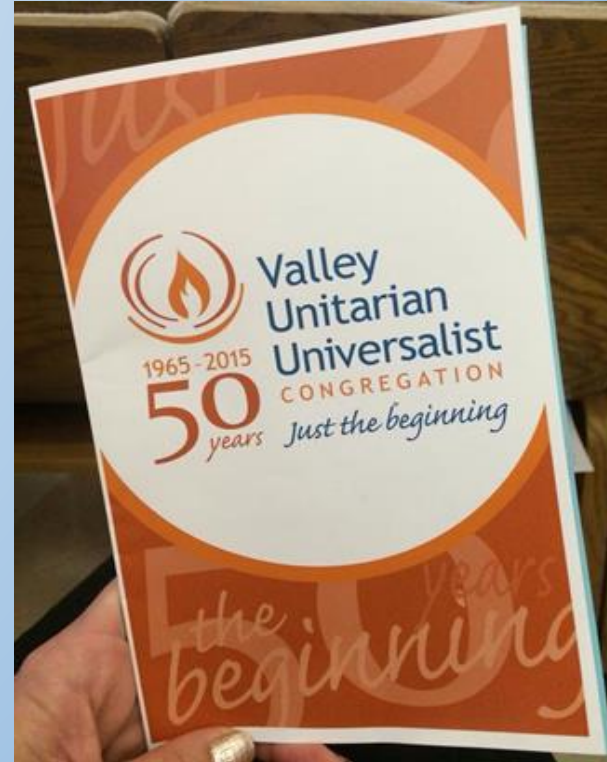


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September 2014 – Concerts and Cabaret



April 2015 – VUU's 50th Jubilee Celebration.





Del Rio Years 2015-2020

The day after the 2016 election, Andy provided gatherings for people who needed to process what had just happened.

Sandy Whitley: “My first encounter with Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation was on January 15, the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day in 2017. The new president was to be inaugurated later that week. I was distraught over the election. I needed help.

Rev. Andy’s sermon that Sunday espoused exactly the values I had treasured my whole life. It brought me to tears. I knew at that moment I had found my spiritual home and attended the welcome circle that day. I was a member of the Congregation a month later. Sometimes one just knows when something is the absolutely, right thing to do. “

Jeanne Gerber: There was a big shift in our involvement happened at the end of 2016 with a satellite group in the East Valley. Since then, I have continued to be involved with the Book Group, joined a women’s group for three years, and participated in many East Valley UU pot lucks and social events.





2017-2019: Justice as Ministry

Sandy Whitley (2017) “I am a climate advocate and I met with Rev. Andy about a year and half after I joined VUU to see if he would be willing to have the Board consider endorsing a bill my organization (Citizens’ Climate Lobby). I was gratified to see the UUUA Statement of Conscience regarding the Threat of Global Warming/Climate Change. When I read that Statement I knew I had found the right spiritual home.”



Diane Hansen: “VUU was a place where I could help save the environment.”





Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Social Justice Ministry Grows with Us, and Grows US



2019 Border Initiative, BLM Activism





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Susan Schwaiger: “I was delighted to find a congregation that supported lesbian and gay families. The opening song was *Lean on Me*. Is this a great church or what?”

Tristan Booth: “I saw a Rainbow Flag at VUU and on the website, so I wanted to come, but we had gone to Zoom services. Diane Hansen: “VUU was a place where I could help save the environment.

Licia Bailey: “My Mormon family even helped me celebrate joining a congregation that made me so happy.”

Matt Bailey: “It took awhile for me to get used to the “weirdo” behavior of VUU, but now I love it.”

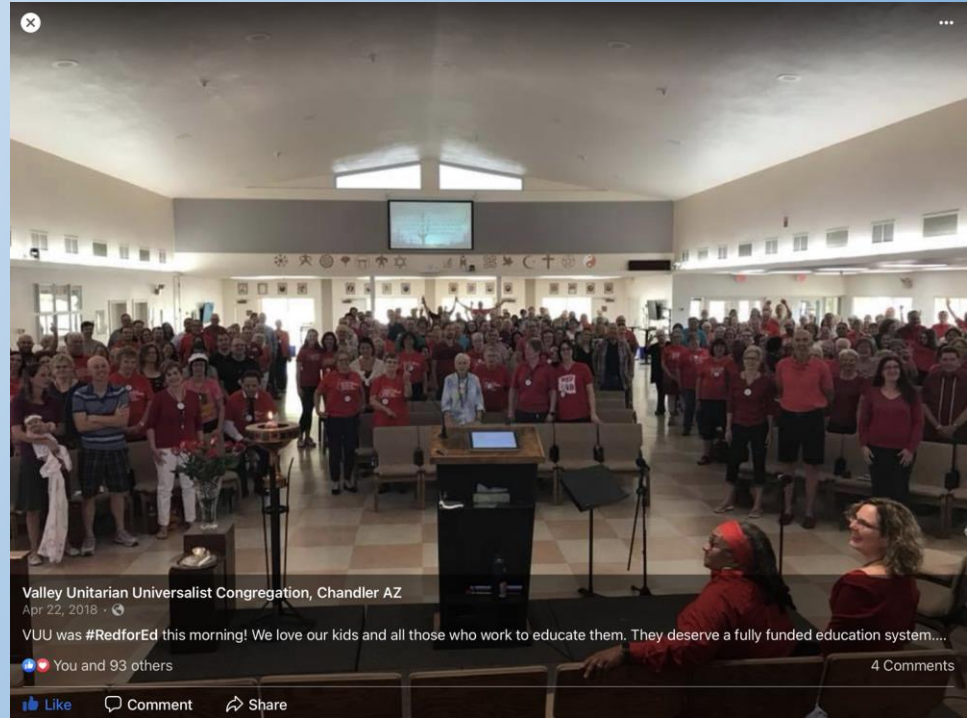
Heidi Halvorson: “Reverend Andy dedicated our son Lincoln James Monforte on February 22, 2015.”





Supporting “Red for Ed” 2018

Jamila Pulliam - On this day, I came to church demoralized and angry. My charter school was against the Red for Ed movement, so only 4 of us teachers participated in the march. The teachers that stayed behind got movie tickets, prizes, and catered lunch for 3 days. Walking into this Sea of Red had me instantly crying and feeling the love and support from my VUU tribe!





Mary Erickson: “I’m discovering that I may be able to make contributions beyond my teaching. Thank you VUU.”

DeeAnne McClenahan: “I-Help lost much of its support from the Phoenix church community when the pandemic hit in March, and they struggled to find homes for the homeless population. VUU stepped up and offered to open our doors 7 days a week.”

Beverly Workman: Was happy to hear a sermon on her first Sunday that exactly matched her interests and values. Loved going through the “Bridge of Love.”





2020 - BIG CHANGES



Between December of 2019 and July of 2020, during the pandemic, three of our four full time staff left VUU. Rev. Kellie retired after three decades of service to begin a new career. Rev. Andy decided to become a hospital chaplain after serving VUU for 8 years, and Administrator Sue Ringler retired after 5 years. Only our Director of Faith Development, Marci Beaudoin remains.





Reverend Dr. Fred Wooden

Rev Dr Fred Wooden comes to us as interim minister after forty years of settled ministry in five previous churches. Though new to AZ, he is a friend of six of our previous ministers. Fred has been active in racial justice his whole career, as well as LGBTQ+ rights.





Marci Beaudoin, Director of Faith Formation



Marci has served VUU for 12 years, after being an active member for some years before that. She guides our education ministry, with Haley Wynne our FF Assistant.





Lora Gustafson, Administrator

Lora joined the VU staff in September of 2020,
having served UU Congregation of Phoenix
before that.



Joe has been with VUU for seven years, after
a long career in the private sector.

 Joe Martin, Maintenance Technician





Katie Seiferth, Music Director



Katie was already attending VUU when she became our acting Music Director in December 2019. She became Music Director in March of 2020, just as the pandemic enveloped the world.





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2020 - 2021

VUU waits—sometimes patiently, sometimes impatiently—for the pandemic to wane, for the Ministerial Search Committee to find us a new minister, for the time when we can come back together, safely, face-to face. In the meantime, VUU members stay active remotely at first and then cautiously in person, carrying on the business and fellowship traditions of the congregation.





Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation



We gathered on Sunday mornings, lit our chalices, and sang together—remotely.

Though we extinguish the chalice, our connection to each other and this community remains.

May its light guide us this week as we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, and fill our world with compassion until we meet again.

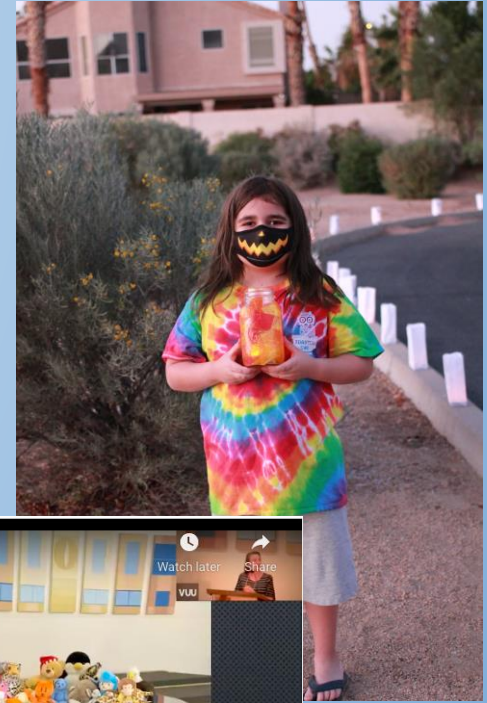




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Faith Formation didn't let covid stop us! We kept finding ways to learn and grow and celebrate.





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The Congregation's work
for Social Justice didn't
take a break.





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VUU's home is in the desert—we harvested in the spring and planted in the fall.





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And as we approach the end of 2021, Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation is gathering again—cautiously—in our sanctuary. Faith Formation classes are starting to meet, we have a new administrator, and we can't wait to start singing together again. Best of all, we're ready to greet a new Settled Minister in 2022!

