

# Crossings

*The Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Church  
at Washington Crossing*

Fall 2015

**Economic Justice**  
At the Morrisville Food Center,  
No One Leaves Hungry

**Witnesses to History**  
50 Years of Change Through  
the Eyes of Betsy Young and  
Mary Ann Sprenkle



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**CROSSINGS: OUR PRINCIPLES IN ACTION**

Articles in *Crossings* focus on the positive work done by UUCWC members and friends that demonstrates our congregation's commitment to the [7 Principles](#). Many good works by our committees, teams, and individuals are inspirational. Unless you are intimately involved with these efforts, however, it can be easy to miss the time and selfless dedication, the challenges overcome, or the joy experienced by those involved — not to mention the impact on those who benefit from their work. By telling our stories, we hope to inspire even greater engagement in social justice, charity, and other positive efforts within UUCWC.

**UUCWC MISSION STATEMENT**

Inspired by our Principles and Purposes, members of the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing unite to create a welcoming, caring religious community. Within this community, we encourage and affirm the individual's quest for authenticity, wisdom and spiritual deepening. We gather to celebrate the wonder of the cosmos and the mystery of life, its passages, its joys and sorrows. Compelled by justice, we give voice to societal concerns and reach out to touch the lives of others.

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## 'There Will Always Be a Need'

Hunger knows no season. It stops at no state line. And love knows no bounds. Week after week, an army of UUCWC members volunteers their hearts and hands in the war on hunger, inspired to do good at the Morrisville Food Center.

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## 4 Women and a Congregation

As UUCWC celebrates 100 years, four members — Betsy Young, Mary Ann Sprenkle, Terry Caton, and Jo Milner — have been with us for half that time. In **Part 1**, we follow 50 years of change at UUCWC through Betsy and Mary Ann's eyes.

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## Betsy Young

Always the social activist, Betsy Young has a vivid memory and a healthy perspective on some of the key moments of our own social history, including our move from Trenton and the establishment of the Vera Hancock Peace Site.

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## Mary Ann Sprenkle

You think UUCWC is liberal-minded? You might not recognize us 50 years ago. Attitudes toward women in our church were maddening enough to Mary Ann Sprenkle to cause her to leave for a while. We've come a long way, baby.

*ON OUR COVER: Elliott Dunner volunteers at the Morrisville Foot Center every other Wednesday, distributing meats and bagged groceries to clients.*



# Helping Hands of Love

*Morrisville Food Center is considered exemplary among its peers for the ways in which it collects and distributes food, buys smart, keeps data, and marshals volunteer help. About 10 UUCWC members contribute to these efforts — passionate about their work and for an organization that “does good well.”*

Story by **Christine Piatek**

Photos by Michael D. Dalzell and Lori O’Neil



**A**t UUCWC, the words “We believe in Economic Justice. No one should go hungry” are both philosophy and commitment. Our members walk this talk in numerous tangible ways: by the work of the Food Ministry, which prepares, packages, and delivers cooked meals to area residents in need; by providing a nourishing hot meal during Home Front Monday night tutoring; through our donations to the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen and our support of the Loaves and Fishes program; and by our support of and participation in the work of the [Morrisville Food Center](#), located just over the Calhoun Street Bridge, in Morrisville, Pa.

Each of these social justice programs receives funding from UUCWC’s Council for Faith in Action (CFA) (see “UUCWC’s Council for Faith in Action, page 7). During the 2014–2015 church year, CFA, through the support of the congregation, dedicated \$1,400 to the Morrisville Food Center (see box, right). CFA’s commitment to the center is supplemented by significant congregational donations of food and money, and — perhaps equally important — investments of volunteer time and passion. “I’ve been doing this for almost 10

years,” says Elliott Dunner. “There are irregularities in our world, so those of us who can help do what we can.”

**“There will always be a need”**

Arriving as early as 5:00 am for a 9:00 am opening, clients come each Wednesday to the Morrisville Food Center from communities in Lower Bucks County, Trenton, and Mercer County. They come by the hundreds — on foot, on bikes, by car. They come by the busload from Luther Arms, a senior and continued care community in Trenton; from Elite Caring in Ewing; from Life St. Francis, an independent living facility in Trenton for the elderly.

Once a month, clients may pick up one to three grocery bags of non-perishable food items, depending on family size, as well as fresh produce, meat, baked goods, and personal care supplies. Clients must meet income guidelines to participate in the program and must show proof of residency, family size, and income on a monthly basis through interviews with Morrisville Food Center volunteers.

Tim Stauffer, director of the Morrisville Food Center, shares that

George Faulker loads the Morrisville Food Center van after a morning of shopping for groceries. George and his son, David, shop at Aldi and Swann’s Pantry, in Bucks County, Thursdays.

## MORRISVILLE FOOD CENTER

A not-for-profit, all-volunteer, and 100% donation-funded organization, the center operates out of the Morrisville Presbyterian Church at 771 N. Pennsylvania Ave. Though the church provides the center with space, a fully equipped kitchen, freezers, food storage areas, and volunteer use of the church’s van, the Morrisville Food Center is a separate organization. The center’s mission is to provide supplemental food assistance to families in need.



Tim Stauffer, director of the Morrisville Food Center





*There is nothing more primary from a theological or philosophical perspective than to take care of poor people.*

— David Hughes

coming to the pantry is often emotionally difficult for clients. Many have lost jobs; some are heads of families who are struggling and without work. “There will always be a need,” says Tim, despite his observation that there has been a slight decline in the number of clients served in recent years. Activity at the center mirrors the state of the economy. In times of recession, the number of clients is greater; when the economy improves, the numbers decline. The center has a database of more than 10,000 clients, and last year it served more than 16,000 people. Half of its clients are working-age adults. One third are children, and the rest are senior citizens.

The number of people it serves is remarkable, considering that from a funding standpoint, the center is caught between a proverbial rock and a hard place. Because it is situated in Pennsylvania, the Morrisville Food Center cannot receive funding from New Jersey, and because most of

the clients are from the Trenton area, it cannot receive funding from the state of Pennsylvania. Thus, the food center must rely completely on the generosity of individual, corporate, and other private donors.

### Volunteers make things go

To keep this vital food assistance program fully functional, more than 80 volunteers — mostly from Bucks and Mercer Counties — work throughout the week in different ways. On Monday, volunteers pack grocery bags. On Tuesdays, the food center is set up to receive clients. McCaffrey’s and Giant supermarkets donate bread and baked goods, and [Rolling Harvest](#), the [Bucks County Opportunity Council](#), and [Mercer Street Friends Food Bank](#) de-

liver food collected from local farms and markets. [Philabundance](#), the largest food pantry in the Delaware Valley, also delivers produce and perishables. These perishable items,

which clients can choose to their liking, are attractively displayed on tables much like a local farmer’s market.

The quality and variety of food and fresh produce is a point of pride with Tim, the center’s director. In fact, the produce choices are so abundant, some clients are



David Hughes distributes meats, as well as bags of staples containing canned food, cleaning goods, and personal care items, to clients.



Darleen Wheeler helps a client choose items from the day’s fresh produce delivery.

unfamiliar with some of the items available in any given week. Tim tells a story about a delivery of plantains one week. “Our Latino clients knew what it was,” he says,

“but many others did not.” Volunteers at the center have been known to help clients understand what’s available that week and how to use it.

Food distribution takes place between 9:00 am and noon on Wednesdays. Inventory is completed after clients leave on Wednesdays, and perishable food that remains at the end of the day on Wednesday is brought to area soup kitchens, including the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen. Volunteers then shop for supplies on Thursdays.

Volunteering at the Food Center twice each month for more than 10 years has been an absolute passion for David Hughes. “There is nothing more primary from a theological or philosophical perspective than to take care of poor people. This principle is central to all faiths.” On a very practical level, he adds, “Kids do better when they are not malnourished.”

While he enjoys volunteering at the food center, David does not escape the upset that the experience brings. The drive to and from his middle class home pronounces the economic disparity between himself and the people he serves at the food center. David knows “There will always be food on my table.”

Bobbie Galloway also volunteered at the food pantry for about three years, helping with food distribution. Her experience volunteering left her with mixed emotions. “It was good in that I saw firsthand how great the need was and may still be,” she recalls. “On the other hand, it is sad that in our country people aren’t in a position to provide food for their families. It was troubling to listen to their hardships and how some of them are living.”

The number of clients served by

## UUCWC's COUNCIL FOR FAITH IN ACTION

The mission of the Council for Faith in Action is to facilitate and support UUCWC’s commitment to be a force for justice, equity, and compassion. CFA does this by evaluating proposals for social justice projects and by managing the funds that UUCWC dedicates to social justice efforts — 50% of Sunday plate collections, exclusive of pledges.

Using criteria that reflect UUCWC’s mission and vision statements and UU principles and values, [CFA funds organizations and causes](#) that UUCWC elects to support. Lynn Quinto, a past chair of CFA, notes that the council prefers to focus on a few social action projects rather than allocating small amounts of money to many groups. In addition, CFA chooses to fund projects and organizations that have a presence of UUCWC volunteers.



Join the Journey.  
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It's good for everyone: Morrisville Food Center clients receive high-quality food, and George Faulkner gets exercise that he says "keeps me healthy."

the Food Center, Bobbye observed, "is both sad and remarkable. Our entire system needs to be transformed – from education, wages, health care, and on and on. At least, the food pantry helps with food needs."

### Tasks vary greatly

Linda and George Faulkner both volunteer at the food center – Linda since 2000 and George since 2009. After Linda and other volunteers complete the written inventory of the food storage area on Wednesday, George and his son, David, shop for groceries on Thursdays. Orders are placed with Aldi, in Fairless Hills, Pa., and Swann's Pantry in Levittown, two food stores that offer discount prices. George and David pick up the many pallets of supplies in the church van, and then return to the Food Center where they and

other volunteers restock the shelves. Additionally, on the second and fourth Thursdays, George and other volunteers receive food deliveries from Mercer Street Friends.

George, who has been volunteering at the food center since 2009, enjoys the physical labor involved in this task, which he says "keeps me healthy." George also enjoys meeting the other volunteers. "We all share common concern and values when helping others," regardless of faith, he says. "There are tangible results in what the Food Center does."

Linda, who keeps meticulous records, reports that from July 2013 to June 2014, food center volunteers spent about \$88,000 on food and other expenses that include vehicle costs and dues paid to Philabundance for the

supplies it provided. "During that same time, we had received about \$85,000 in donations," Linda observes, adding that the "numbers go up and down, but in the end we seem to be keeping even most of the time. It is very cyclical and depends upon both donations and the economy."

Tim, David, George, and Linda each stress a critical need: "We need help," says George – referring to volunteer drivers, shoppers, interviewers, baggers, folks who can stock the shelves in the pantry, folks who can manage physical labor. 80 volunteers can be stretched thin when serving 16,000 people per year.

UUCWC's commitment to the Morrisville Food Center is clear in its support from CFA. Volunteering at the center is another many of our own members walk the talk.

**CHRISTINE PIATEK** is an environmental lawyer in the public sector who has a passion for writing.



Linda Faulkner is backstage taking inventory on a Wednesday, a day before her husband and son will go shopping.



When they return from shopping, it's time for David (left) and George Faulkner to stock the shelves.



Fresh bread and produce line one of the pickup stations at the Morrisville Food Center. Volunteers take clients around the table and pack bags of food for them.



Clients check in each month before they collect food. The check-in process confirms clients' addresses and income levels, as well as when they were last at the center.



For additional information on volunteer opportunities, contact the Food Center at [MPCfoodcenter@gmail.com](mailto:MPCfoodcenter@gmail.com).





# 4 Women and a Congregation

**W**hen you think about the last 50 years, it is impressive how many influential people have been in our world and just how many ground-breaking events have taken place: Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, and Richard Nixon. The Civil Rights Movement, the first man on the moon, and the Vietnam War. The Berlin Wall went up, the Cold War played out, communism in Europe came down. Hostages in Iran, 9/11, and the capture of Saddam Hussein. The advent of computers, cell phones, and modern medical miracles. The first black president, the Supreme Court's decision on marriage equality, and North Carolina removing the confederate flag from its capitol.

Unitarian Universalism has experienced numerous changes as well.

## *Stories by Margaret DeAngelis*

In 2011, the UUA celebrated 50 years since the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. The UUA has advanced a religion without doctrine in the hope that welcoming communities and shared causes, not creeds, will draw people through our doors.

Within our own walls, members of UUCWC have carefully thought out our mission as a congregation, debated numerous decisions, and fostered mindful and loving ways to reach out to all people who come through our doors.

In tandem with our evolving world, UUCWC has grown and transcended. Over the course of this church year, *Crossings* will publish interviews with all four of our living members who have been with our congregation for 50 years or more — half of its history — and have made a difference in our own spiritual community.

I had the honor of listening to Betsy Young, Mary Ann Sprenkle, Jo Millner, and Terry Caton, tell

their stories of their relationships with our church. What I learned from this process was that there were a lot of little changes, along with mountains of growth and progress, that led to the faith community we know today. Additionally, big and small disappointments created patience, wisdom, and a sense of humor.

What I found inspiring is that each woman tells her own story of a community that continues to grow, to reach for new understandings, and to honor our history in the process. The most common thread among these women is that each is still passionate about our church, excited about how we are growing, and hopeful for our future.

This month, we publish experiences of two of them — Betsy Young and Mary Ann Sprenkle — as they testify to the changes that existed in the world, our community at UUCWC, and of course themselves. In later issues this church year we will publish the stories of Jo Millner and Terry Caton. Many thanks to all four for telling their *herstory* as we understand our own UUCWC history.



# A People of Justice

From her presence at King's "I Have a Dream" speech to our move out of Trenton to UUCWC's dedication as a Peace Site, **Betsy Young** has been on the forefront of social and racial justice movements of the last half century. She has been a leader in bringing those movements alive within our own walls.

Growing up, Betsy Young had tastes of several different religions. As a little girl in Easton, Pa., she went to a Presbyterian church. "But my mother got into a fight with a minister," she remembers, "so my parents never went back." Later, her parents moved to Reading, Pa., where Betsy began to attend a Lutheran church — on her own. "My parents didn't object, but they certainly didn't want to go themselves."

She attended the Lutheran church until she went to college. It wasn't long after, though, that Betsy's religious trajectory arched in a way that may feel familiar to many of us. "When I was away at college, I started to hear different opinions," she



The First Unitarian Church of Trenton that Betsy Young joined in 1965 was at 489 West State Street. The building, now gone, is on the site of today's Luther Towers.

says, "and I realized the Lutheran church was not for me." By this time, her mother had found a spiritual home at the Unitarian church in Reading, and Betsy joined her there occasionally when she had the time to go.

In 1961, Betsy married Mort Farrah in the same Unitarian church. Mort's mother was Jewish and his father Greek Orthodox, and with a laugh Betsy recounts, "It seemed like the Unitarian church was a comfortable meeting ground for everybody, so that made the decision."

But it wasn't until 4 years later that they started to attend our congregation — then the First Unitarian Church of Trenton, at 489 W. State Street — on a regular basis. By then, she and Mort were living in the Trenton area, had given birth to a son, Adam, and wanted to find people with a common

interest. Our church just fit the bill.

"When we walked into the foyer we just felt totally welcomed," she recalls. She and Mort joined shortly thereafter, on March 7, 1965.

*A foyer?* At the time, the congregation was meeting in an old house, its small rooms making for a very close-knit feel. Betsy recalls the nursery and RE classes, which were located on the third floor. "The curriculum was so different then, but it reflected the times," she says. "Later on, the church bought the house right next door, and we had Sunday School in that building, and that was fun for the kids. They felt they had the whole place to themselves."

I ask Betsy if she had defined her own theology at that time. "Not really, but I felt quite free there. We didn't have any prayers at the time, and I was very comfortable there. I thought there was probably something bigger than all of us, but I didn't have time to think of more. I was quite busy and I loved the free-thinking crowd."

### On leaving Trenton

When the time came, Betsy was not in favor of the church leaving Trenton. "I was very against it. There were about 5 of us or so who really did not want to leave. We felt we were deserting the area and weren't being true to what we thought Unitarian Universalism was all about. We were right there in the middle of a black neighborhood, we had a lot of activities going on, and I just felt we were selling out."

Betsy and the others "put up a good fight but we were very outnumbered," and the congregation voted to purchase land in Ewing, N.J. She lists Jean and Bert Work and Jim Drayton as among the few who voted against the move. Several more believed the congregation should stay in Trenton but did not want to fight about it — including the congregation's only black couple at the time. "But when we voted to leave," she recalls, that couple left the church. "How sad!"

Betsy says she was "very hurt" by the vote to move. She thought about leaving, too, but says "There was really nowhere else for us to go — and Mort

*There were about 5 of us or so who really did not want to leave [Trenton]. We felt we were deserting the area and weren't being true to what we thought Unitarian Universalism was all about. We were right there in the middle of a black neighborhood, we had a lot of activities going on, and I just felt we were selling out.*

and I were really so invested in the church. He was more sensible than I was at the time, and he thought, 'It doesn't matter where we go — as long as we are together.' So he wasn't going to fight it."

Betsy Young has a sense of humor that had me laughing throughout this interview. "I'm sure you heard the first piece of property we tried to buy didn't work out. The neighborhood gave us a hard time, which I just loved because we were told we should move to an area where the people were like-minded. The neighbors just couldn't stand us. I took a lot of silly satisfaction out of that."

The church wandered a number of years. For a while, we were housed in the Fisk School in West Trenton, "and the kids thought to have a church with a basketball court in the middle of coffee hour was pretty cool." Betsy laughs. "But then when the new church [in Titusville] came and there wasn't a basketball court, the kids were surprised and felt kind of let down."

Looking back, though, Betsy realizes that moving the church was the right decision in the long run. "We could never have stayed in Trenton. But it was in the middle of the '60s, a big time in history, and



*A wonderful difference is that today, we don't have to wait for Black History Month to have multicultural influences in our services. [Today, we have] readings from all different kinds of people, all walks of life. It's just wonderfully different.*

I felt horrible for leaving. But we hung in there," she says of her connection to UUCWC, "and I'm glad we did."

#### **Strong personalities, seminal moments**

Betsy has vivid memories of ministers and members integral to our history — people whose names are familiar to most of us today, even though their physical presence is long gone.

While we were temporarily in Ewing, Betsy had such differences with our minister, Carl Bierman, she tended to stay in the Sunday school.

"He was just so anti-women. He really felt we had our place," she recalls. "And most people didn't care; they said, 'Well, that's just Carl.'"

"And I said, 'Well that's Carl — the minister of our church.'"

During the gas crisis of 1974, Rev. Bierman stirred up a hornet's nest with a remark about women that Betsy (and several other long-term members) remember to this day. "He said from the pulpit, 'A lot would be solved if women just stayed home because all women

do is get in the car and go have coffee klatches.' I just got up and walked out on that, and I never went back again while he was in the pulpit."

Creed Myers — a senior and respected member of the congregation who would eventually be a part of our church community for 60 years — used the opportunity to reach out to Betsy. He reminded her of something that many of us came to realize during our recent ministerial transition.

"I remember Creed saying this to me, 'Ministers will come and go, but we are still going to be here.'" Creed Myers was a man of wisdom. And Betsy understood just what he meant.

"That's how I felt, too," she says. This would not be a repeat of her mother walking away for good from the Easton Presbyterian church. "We were bigger than the minister, more than the minister."

We've come a long way since then, I tell Betsy.

"I know!" she replies. "When those candles [of fellowship] get lit every Sunday morning I think, 'Boy,

oh boy, a lot went into each of those!'"

If you weren't here in those early years in Titusville, it might be hard to grasp just how much had to take place here for every one of those candles to earn its place on that table next to the pulpit. How much soul-searching. How much gut-wrenching reflection we had to do about what we are together, not individually. What we want to stand for. What we want to say about ourselves as a congregation and a denomination.

Take just one of those candles we light each Sunday: *We are a Vera Hancock Peace Site*.



Betsy credits Vera Hancock and her husband with desegregating movie theatres in Trenton.

"You know, there were a lot of people who wished Vera would just go away, because she was such a gadfly," Betsy recalls. "She and her husband desegregated the movie theaters in Trenton. She sat in the balcony with the black families and raised such a Cain until these movie theaters were integrated. She annoyed a lot of people here, especially in the early stages, because people didn't want to deal with social action at the time."

Fast forward to 1983. Vera had passed away the previous year and left the church \$500. UUCWC used the money to establish our church as a peace site — the Vera Hancock Peace Site. On the eve of the designation ceremony, Barbara Livingstone, co-chair of the committee, heard that Vera's daughter would be visiting from the Midwest to attend.

"I didn't know anyone was coming, and when I found out I laughed and said, Uh-oh! We better get serious about this!"

Ah, Betsy's humor again: Our congregation had taken this designation very seriously — for months, actually. Over a period of nine months, we held meetings about whether to do this — and why. What it would mean. What it would say about ourselves. And what was holding us back. A lot had to be resolved as we listened to one another and worked through people's concerns. Looking back, this process might have been one of those fertile events when we drew together as a congregation, grew together, and moved forward.

Ultimately, the ceremony was at once moving and meaningful. Barbara had arranged for Barbara Sigmund, then mayor of Princeton and cofounder of Womanspace, to be the keynote speaker. The mayor's office in Trenton also sent a representative to the ceremony. "A young associate showed up," says Betsy, "and being funny, I said, 'I guess you drew the short straw.' He said, 'You know, as part of the staff, we go places on the weekends. But this is a real gem. I was just meant to be here.'"

"One of the most beautiful moments was when Glenn Miller, a Vietnam vet, spoke to the congregation," Betsy remembers. "At the time, Vietnam vets were having a terrible time with acceptance in this country, and he got up for a few minutes and said



Betsy, second from left in the back row, poses with her fourth- through sixth-grade students at the conclusion of a religious education camping trip to Wharton State Forest in the 1970s. The girl in the back row, third from the left, is Julie Anne Silberman (now the Rev. Julie Anne Silberman-Bunn); Betsy's son, Adam, is in the lower left corner.



Betsy at the First Unitarian Church of Trenton tent at Heritage Days, a celebration of cultural diversity in Trenton, in 1981. The church changed its name to UUCWC in 1982.



such amazing words and brought us all to tears. It was so heartfelt. If anyone knew how important peace was and what it meant, it was him. He just spoke from his heart and soul.”

“What a powerful moment that day! At that moment I thought, ‘Wow, this was all just worth it!’ After nine months of meetings and talking to anyone who had concerns, trying to be as open as possible, those two things [the mayoral representative’s remark and the Vietnam vet’s speech] just made all the hard work easy. We really worked hard to be open to everyone’s thoughts.”

I comment on how admirable it is to be open to everyone’s thoughts. “It’s funny,” Betsy replies. Early in the Peace Site process, “One member said to me, ‘Well, now, we are going to have hippies lying out in the front of our doors?’ I laughed to myself and said, ‘What self-respecting hippie would come out all this way to here?’”

Today, an aging, self-respecting hippie might come to Titusville not only to lie in front of our doors, but to walk through them, join our congregation, and stay for life. We have indeed moved forward.

### An awakening and a dream

Betsy’s “hippie” comment reminds us that by 1983 we weren’t as progressive as we are today. It also reminds me that she personally was on the forefront of the racial justice movement. One of her formative moments came two decades prior — when she was at Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech on Aug. 28, 1963.

“I went on that bus because I had a 3-month-old infant who had colic and I saw there was a free bus ride to Washington. I was so sleep-deprived that I didn’t realize the importance of the event. I really didn’t know what it was about.” All she knew was that Martin Luther King Jr. was going to speak and that Peter, Paul, and Mary were going to sing. “And my husband took Adam and said, ‘Go!’”

I got on the bus. I don’t think it even dawned on me that there were very few white people on that bus. I slept all the way to Washington. When we all got out and started walking, I realized that it was the first time I was awake in three months!”



Men wore ties to church when Betsy joined our congregation in Trenton. Those mentioned in this article include Creed Myers (lower left with the bowtie), who himself would become part of the half-century club; Alice and Earl Wagner, seated together behind Creed; and Jean Work, between and behind the Wagners. Vera Hancock, wearing a black hat and partially obscured, is toward the back on the left. “That hat brings back a flood of memories for me,” says Betsy.

It didn’t take long for Betsy to realize the significance of the event. “True, Peter Paul and Mary did sing, but, boy, this was history-making! This was really important. Oh my gosh, I felt so lucky to be there!”

How ironic that a moment borne out of exhaustion ignited an awakening. It fueled a lifelong passion in Betsy for what is right and just.

### Then and now

When I ask Betsy what is different now than in earlier years at our church, she remarks about how much more “formal and polished” our services are today. “And there are so many lay-led services! For many years, that was not allowed. What Mary Ann [Sprenkle] and I had to do to have that first lay-led service was incredible.

“Mary Ann desperately wanted this. She did most of the work, and I just helped. We were still in Trenton, and we had one lay-led service that Mary Ann led and it was very sweet. After it was over, people said, ‘Oh this is great.’ But boy, that was a hard one, you know, getting it off the ground. That really was difficult.

“Another wonderful difference is that today, we don’t have to wait for Black History Month to have multicultural influences in our services. [Today, we have] readings from all different kinds of people, all walks of life. It’s just wonderfully different.”

These differences speak to how far we seem to have come since Betsy first walked through the door of that old house in Trenton in 1965. “In some ways, it was a very different church in the beginning. There have been some really remarkable changes.”

What does Betsy wish didn’t change? “Well, I don’t have a computer — and that’s by choice — but I really miss the newsletter to keep me abreast of things. Not that the church has to stop moving forward, but I really miss that. It was a good way for me to keep in touch.”

Our growth over the years forced a difficult conversation internally about going from one to two services on Sunday — a change we finally made in 2004. Betsy appreciates that two services provides people with greater access to the church, “But I miss the smaller group. So I go to the early service on Sunday mornings. It’s good when I teach Sunday school, because I can go to the early

service and teach Sunday school too.”

Yes, all these years later, Betsy still takes the time to teach.

“I’m so delighted with the Religious Education programs for our children, and I credit that to Robin Pugh.” Today, there are more than 30 RE teachers and more than 100 children in our RE program — far more than the number who would have fit into that third-floor room in Trenton. “Many people now recognize that children are our future. That’s so important.

Also I’m so impressed with our Social justice programs,” she says. This may be the change most near and dear to an old activist’s heart. “That has really changed so much since our days in Trenton. It really has stepped up as the years went by.

When Betsy joined the First Unitarian Church of Trenton at the tender age of 24, the old guard at the time was “so conservative and I was so impatient that more people were not interested in working for social justice on a churchwide basis. We were great for forums, panel discussions, and lectures,” but when it came to action many in the church were involved in social justice activities and saw little reason to do so as a church. “I think many were afraid of controversy or negative publicity for the church,” she says.

But Betsy now recognizes the greater struggle the elders of the church had weathered: “What it took to keep this church going — how we had to meet in people’s homes to keep the momentum — and I really appreciate the vision they had.” Among those she knew personally: Earl and Alice Wagner, Mert and Sue Adams, George and Jean Steill, and Lily Dickenson.

“I wish they could see this now, because it is so beyond what anyone could have dreamed. I have so much more appreciation for them now than when I was younger.”

I remind Betsy of what Rev. Kim said during one of her moments in the pulpit: “This congregation really walks the walk.”

Says Betsy: “I was so proud when she said that.”



# A People of Inclusion

Building a community is hard work. In a faith that encourages individuality, being in community might be even harder work. **Mary Ann Sprenkle** believes the fact that we've done both is the true measure of growth.

**M**ary Ann Sprenkle has seen a lot of change over a half century. And she's positively upbeat about what she's seen our congregation become.

"What is interesting for me is watching the changes that have been taking place — not because there is a new minister, but because the congregation has grown in strength as well as numbers," she says. "We've developed into a body of people who have enormous talents and big hearts and a commitment to Unitarian Universalism. I feel so blessed to be a part of that."

"When I think of the range of beliefs and expressions of faith that we've gone through over the years, from the humanism of the 1960s to being more able to express our spirituality, it's so exciting. Sometimes, people describe themselves as what they *don't believe*. I did this, too, being a former Lutheran. But that turned around, as with many of us. That is a big sign of growth."

That's also quite an accomplishment, if you think about it. A good leader can shepherd a congregation toward that place, but Mary Ann says the congregation also deserves credit for being willing to find and to retain that sort of leader.

"It's important that we have attracted and sus-

tained the ministers that we have had. We have opened ourselves to a lot of different kinds of people. I think that is our joy and our strength."

That kind of openness doesn't happen overnight. As we have seen with marriage equality on a national level, acceptance in society comes gradually. "I don't think that 40 or 50 years ago our own congregation would have been open to openly gay, lesbian and transgender people. That was beyond what we could have accepted, but that may also have been society as a whole," says Mary Ann. "We grew to understand and accept differences."

The difference Mary Ann sees between society and our congregation is that our congregation is not content with acceptance alone. "I think our church reflects society but also *leads* society. We were always known as the ground breakers, the out-in-the-forefront people."

### Searching for a spiritual home

Why did Mary Ann seek this type of home? Start with her high school years, when Mary Ann had arguments with her father about religion.

"At that time, I was taking a class in comparative religions. It was like someone opened my eyes. And I said, 'My god, there are people around the world — Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists —

who believe different things and they believe them very strongly. How could they all be wrong?' It was during a time when Christian churches were calling people who weren't Christian 'heathens,' and that just blew my mind.

"I thought to myself, 'It can't be that those people are wrong and the others are right. People should not be excluded because of different beliefs.' That really had a strong effect on me — the thought that someone could be rejected for what they believed."

That's also what fueled the arguments with her father. "He wasn't a hard-nosed man, but he believed his church was the gospel truth. And I just drove him nuts. I shook him up because I was the only child, the darling of his eye."

Mary Ann Sprenkle joined the First Unitarian Church of Trenton in September 1964. A young teacher living in Levittown, Pa., she was looking for some place to call her spiritual home. "There was an offshoot church in Levittown called the Lower Bucks Fellowship, and I went there. They talked about where they came from in Trenton, so I thought, 'Let me check that out.'" When she did, she felt so at home, she stayed.

"When I walked into church and heard the words of openness and tolerance, I knew I was in the right place. I felt, 'Oh my gosh, there is a place where I can find people who believe what I believe!'"

Did her dad know that she was going to our church? "Yes he did, but he didn't know what to make of it." Mary Ann smiles. "As I got to a certain point in my life, I tried not to get into too many arguments with my parents, because I realized that was unproductive."

To Mary Ann, who has long been a part of UUCWC's choir, music is a very important component of worship. If words of openness and tolerance brought her through our doors, it was the music that kept her here.

"They sang hymns and had people who played different instruments in addition to their piano and music. There was no choir then. But a woman named Lily Dickinsen, the guiding light behind the

*I don't think that 40 or 50 years ago [our own congregation] would have been open to openly gay, lesbian and transgender people. That was beyond what we could have accepted, but that may also have been society as a whole. "We grew to understand and accept differences."*

music program, brought in different musicians. As soon as I heard that, that's what made the cut — that's what sold me! For me, the music is the heart of my spirituality."

Early in her days at Trenton, Mary Ann took her mother to a service. "That Sunday, we sang a hymn she knew from her own church, with variations on the words. I think at least for one brief shining moment, she felt comfortable."

### Staying, leaving, and returning

As time went on, Mary Ann became very active in church affairs, serving as board secretary. "I got to know Creed Myers and much older members who pretty much ran the congregation. I was very fond of them."

But the good feelings began to mellow as the 1960s marched on. Society was changing; our church wasn't changing fast enough for Mary Ann. In society, the ideals of the Flower Children conflicted with those of a more conservative old guard, and the same was playing out in our own congregation. Old attitudes become entrenched with reinforcement from the top, and Mary Ann points to our minister at the time.

Rev. Carl Bierman, she says, was a "very impressive guy. Very bright. But this was a period when





Board president Jean Davis was among the strong females in our congregation...



... during Rev. Carl Bierman's tenure. Mary Ann clashed with Carl about women's place in the world.

the Unitarians had just combined with the Universalists, and the church was more humanist then. He was very much of an intellectual. He was against the war in Vietnam, and that raised some hackles in the congregation."

Mary Ann could live with that. It was something else that bothered her.

"As time went on, I gradually became aware that Carl was a chauvinist. He really thought that a woman's place was in the home. He believed his wife Dolores's place was in the home. He and I got into more and more battles about women and their place in the world, and I just got to the

point that I felt his attitudes were unbearable."

I ask Mary Ann if he ever agreed to disagree and possibly learn from them?

"Oh I don't know," she replies. "He had to have disagreements with other women in the congregation, because it was a congregation of very powerful personalities — and a number of them were women." In fact, during this period, Jean Davis became our first female board president.

"So it wasn't that he dominated in such a way that women didn't lead in the congregation," Mary Ann clarifies, "but he had very strong opinions, with which I disagreed."

And then, she adds: "He must have learned something, because he stayed a long time."

Carl Bierman stayed for more than 15 years. He and Charles Stephens were the only ministers in our church's history to stay that long in the pulpit.

Mary Ann wanted to stay, too. But societal change in America was in the water, and Mary Ann dived into it — with or without the support of her minister. Ultimately, it caused a crisis in her faith. Enough was enough.

"In early '70s, just as the women's movement was going strong, I did something that a lot of members do: I got overextended and I burnt out. So in 1972 I left, thinking I would leave for just a little while.

"I remember Creed Myers called me and said, 'Well, are you coming back?'" Creed Myers was a peacemaker, a bridge-builder. "And I said, 'Well, I don't know.'"

Mary Ann Sprenkle didn't come back for 10 years. At the same time our congregation was looking for a permanent home north of Trenton, Mary Ann, too, was looking for a place to go.

"When I was away from the church, every now and then I'd think, 'Oh, I know the place where this would be appropriate, where this would be the right idea.' For instance, I went to a 12-step program. During that time, I ran into a problem because they dedicated themselves to a higher power but did not define what that higher power was. Some people took to interpreting it as the *only* higher power, a Christian god. My sponsor was a very strong Christian woman, but I couldn't talk with her because we were diametrically opposed to what a 'higher power' meant."

One day, Mary Ann was sitting in a 12-step meeting and had what she calls a "revelation."

"I thought, 'I know where I need to be! I need to be where people are trying not to jam what they believe down my throat.' That was a wake-up call."

Mary Ann finally returned to UUCWC in the early '80s. By this time, a woman — Deborah Pope-Lance — was in the pulpit, whose presence told Mary Ann that a lot had changed. "I made a vow to myself that I wasn't going to get sucked in to too many things," she recalls, "and for a while I held back. But I got really hooked again — and I've

been happily hooked ever since."

Mary Ann laughs at the memory. "I took a break, and came back and rededicated myself. Now I call myself a 'born again Unitarian.'"

### **Ironies, then and now**

Later in our conversation, I ask Mary Ann about Rev. Peter Jenkins. "He was a mixed blessing and could be very charismatic. Sadly, it was a very tough time at our church after he left because it came out that he had misused his pastoral role by sexually using women in the congregation. People were hurt and betrayed by him."

One of the ironies about the positive turn of attitudes toward women at UUCWC is that this change got a big push forward during Peter Jenkins's ministry.

"Peter was married to a wonderful woman named Julie," whom Mary Ann says was encouraged by her husband to teach a course in feminist theology. That course was called Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, which is still popular at UUCWC today. "I can still remember everyone in that class, and if you asked each of them, they would say it was a major turning point in the way they looked at religion, the world, and women.

"It had a wiccan component and an ancient history component. It taught about the goddess belief of many civilizations. Twenty-seven years ago, that was mind blowing!" Mary Ann recalls. "So many people were there — Ruth Samsel and Barbara Livingstone, Bonnie Ruekgauer, Betsy Young, Terry Caton, just to name a few. If you asked any one of us, we would say that was just the most amazing experience."

Fifty-one years in our congregation has earned



Cakes for the Queen of Heaven gathering in June 1989. Clockwise from top left: Betsy Young, Pat Groth, Mary Ann Sprenkle, Lynn Hanson, Terry Caton, Michelle Hunt, Charlie Groth, Linda Siecke, Ericka Bergquist, Julie Jenkins.

Mary Ann the right to offer advice to both new members and old. And embedded in her wisdom is yet another bit of irony, born of her own experience with an old guard that clung to an identity of their church and with new blood whose energy can help to enrich that identity.

"I think this idea can be pretty daunting to a new member: Keep an open mind. Try to be involved in some way," she offers. And to older members, Mary Ann adds, "Involve and help the newer members in their quest. Support and welcome them."

If anything, our history is proof: When new members feel as if they are *part of* the community, we, grow — not just in numbers but *in* community.

"UUCWC hasn't been without its difficulties along the way," says Mary Ann, looking back. "But each door we open seems to reward us with a lot of richness. I can't imagine not having UUCWC in my life. I wouldn't even want to ponder the notion. It is such an integral part of my life."

MARGARET DEANGELIS has been a UUCWC member since 2007. Her interviews with Jo Millner and Terry Caton will appear in future issues of *Crossings*.