

THE WEATHER TODAY, C2

8 a.m. 47°
 Noon 63°
 4 p.m. 68°
 8 p.m. 56°

Team effort brings new floor to Oxford church gym. Sports, B1

Burned Recreation opens to rave reviews. Local News, C1

Piecing Together Unity In the Name of God

Local congregations of different religions work together for the benefit of the community and each other.

By **BROOKE AUSTILL**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

THE VILLAGES

In Florida's Friendliest Hometown, interfaith unity is everywhere.

For years, congregations in and around The Villages have been working with and fostering good relationships with others of different religions, a message now being promoted by one of the world's most well-known religious figures.

Pope Francis, known worldwide as the pope of mercy, released his first-ever video prayer message earlier this month highlighting the importance of communication among different faith groups.

In the message, the pope featured representatives of different faiths, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in an effort to highlight interfaith unity and show that all people are children of God, no matter to whom they direct their prayers.

In The Villages, residents fulfill the pope's

Please See **TOGETHER, A10**



George Horsford | Daily Sun

Sheldon Skurow, of the Village Santiago and spiritual leader of Temple Shalom, talks to visitors about the 140-year-old Torah used by Temple Shalom during the event A Celebration of Jewish Culture last week.

INSIDE: CHURCHES HOLD EVENTS TO BENEFIT SOUP KITCHEN, A9

Connecting

In The Villages, congregations that worship together stay together. For the past two years, Lady Lake United Methodist Church and New Song Community Church have held sunrise Easter services together. The church pastors agree that congregants are all connected by God.

Uniting

Members of Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County attended Temple Shalom's open house of Jewish culture Jan. 23 to unite with and support the Jewish community. Pope Francis released a video message earlier this month highlighting the importance of support among different faith groups.

Providing

First Baptist Church at The Villages and Grace African Episcopal Church provide faith-based outreach services through community service projects. Pastor Bob Perry of the First Baptist Church said the congregation's visions of providing Christ to the community are more important than their religious differences.

Sharing

Temple Shalom of Central Florida built a friendship with United Church of Christ. The basis of the two different faith congregations resulted in the temple sharing its new building with the growing Christian congregation for two years. Since then, the two congregations have shared many spiritual experiences.



TOGETHER

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vision by supporting congregations of different faiths.

About 10 members of Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County, in Summerfield, attended Temple Shalom of Central Florida's open house of Jewish culture Jan. 23, showing support for the Jewish community.

The open house was an opportunity for residents of all faiths to learn about Judaism.

Doris Paillet, a member of the Unitarian church, said she attended the event to support the temple and to spread the idea of doing good for the community.

"One of the purposes of being a member of any congregation is to be welcoming to all people, including those of different religions," the Village Rio Grande resident said. "It's important to support each other's efforts to enhance understanding in all communities."

Residents like Paillet are helping to bring people of all faiths closer together, benefiting their churches, each other and the community.

God's Children Sharing Space

Two congregations of different faiths have spent the last eight years building a friendship.

From hanging fruits on a traditional Jewish hut to celebrating the birth of a house of worship, members of Temple Shalom of Central Florida and United Church of Christ have continued to support each other.

The foundation for this blossoming spiritual relationship began in 2008 with a celebratory first meeting.

After forming and growing the only Jewish congregation in The Villages, spiritual leader Sheldon Skurow and more than 200 members of the temple headed out on a joyous trek to their newly constructed synagogue on County Road 101.

The congregation marched in a Kadimah walk more than 3 miles long, passing the Torah to each member as they wore out their shoes.

As the Jewish congregation approached the last turn on its journey, up ahead in an empty field was another group of God's children.

Though they are members

The Jewish congregation was so touched by this group of strangers that they shared their new temple with the growing congregation for the next two years.

Then in August 2010, the Jewish congregation celebrated the birth of United Church of Christ's first facility, just as the group of Christians had done with them two years before.

This time, the United Church of Christ congregation marched in its own Christian-style Kadimah walk, led by Willard, who carried a Bible, a chalice and a cross from the temple to the church's current facility, also on County Road 101.

Temple members walked down the road with the Christian church members, celebrating their friends' new beginning.

A special combined service was held once they reached the church, and blessings in English and Hebrew were said in celebration.

Since that joyous day nearly six years ago, the two congregations have supported and learned from each other through combined services, dramatic readings and a traditional Jewish hut-building service.

Two other local congregations laid the foreground for a spiritual friendship last year, despite their different faiths.

First Baptist Church at The Villages began sharing space with Grace African Methodist Episcopal Church last January.

The Methodist congregation still holds Sunday services in the Baptist church's fellowship hall, located on County Road 42.

Pastor Bob Perry, of First Baptist, said sharing the space came from knowing the experience.

"We knew what it was like to start a church," the Village of Chatham resident said. "We just really had a sense that this is what the Lord wanted us to do."

Although the churches are of different denominations, the two congregations formed a friendship, worked together on community projects and even had a combined Thanksgiving service last year.

Perry said the two churches' visions of bringing Christ to the community are more significant than their different faiths, which has made for a strong spiritual bond.

Lady Lake United Methodist Church also has offered

Pastor Carolyn Thomas, of Lady Lake, said when religious faiths join together and worship under one roof, it represents unity to God.

"As a religious community, no matter what faith, we need to join together to help usher in the Kingdom of God and transform the community and the world," she said. "When religious organizations join together, we are showing unity in Christ."

Connecting Through Worship

In The Villages, congregations that worship together stay together, despite their religious backgrounds.

Worshipping together has become an annual tradition for Lady Lake United Methodist Church and New Song Community Church.

For the past two years, the congregations have held sunrise Easter services together followed by a fellowship breakfast.

The neighbor churches, located directly across the street from each other, will commemorate the resurrection of Jesus for a third time this year.

Pastor Tom Ash, of New Song, said the combined service shows the community that with Jesus as the focus, two faiths can unite as one.

"The reality is that we're all focused on one thing, and that's Christ," he said.

Temple Shalom of Central Florida and United Church of Christ will continue their tradition of worshipping together this year with several special unions.

The temple will host a Seder, or Jewish feast, in honor of the Christian holiday Maundy Thursday, which is the holy day that falls on the Thursday before Easter.

A reader's drama performance combining three different faiths also is being planned by both congregations.

The dramatic reading is based on the book "Faith Club," written by three women who are Jewish, Christian and Muslim.

The reading will be performed at 4 p.m. Feb. 27 at United Church of Christ.

Representatives from the three faiths will perform in the drama, including members of Temple Shalom and United Church of Christ.

Pastor Willard, of United Church of Christ, said the storytelling drama will

Sharing Spiritual Experiences

Temple Shalom's spiritual leader, Sheldon Skurow, said despite their religious beliefs, United Church of Christ and the Jewish congregation continue to unite as one through their similarities.

"I think the foundation is that we're all on same page," he said. "We want peace, harmony and want to be as one."

The resident of the Village Santiago said along with friendship, the congregations have gained an understanding of their different religions.

"I think temple members have gained an understanding," he said. "Even though we believe differently, we get along because we're all praying to one God."

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