



## **The Reverend Shay St. John honored with Wise Woman Award**

by Beverly Denver

For the inspiration and guidance she has given to so many others in her life, The Reverend Shay St. John, minister of the Unity Church of North Houston, has been named the recipient of the 2009 Wise Woman Award, part of *Houston Woman Magazine's* Nominate HER Awards program.

The award was presented to her at a festive luncheon on June 25 at the Hotel Icon. The ministry of The Reverend Shay St. John began in 1978 as she pioneered a Unity group in Savannah, Georgia. After seven years of dedicated service, she left a financially healthy ministry there — complete with a debt-free building — to move on to San Francisco, California and serve at Unity Christ Church.

After six years with that congregation, she was offered the position of Vice President of Development for the Association of Unity Churches. Delighted by the new challenge, she took the job and served there for 12 years.

This “new” job in Unity opened the doors to many Unity ministers and congregants wanting to learn and conduct principle-centered ways to do successful fundraising in Unity. The Rev. St. John’s passion became — and still is — to help Unity churches put financial feet on their spiritual vision.

A single mother raised The Rev. St. John in the mountains of Virginia — at a time when single parent families were frowned on. She tells the following story:

“I quickly learned that most families would not accept their children playing or interacting with me.

“As a rather determined child, I discovered that I had a close relationship with nature – including my Uncle’s growing crops, robins and the family pets. These ‘pets’ were all strays – cats, dogs and their prolific litters. Even pigs were my friends – especially when it came to time to feed them.

“I was asked to raise a calf whose mother died giving birth. And, so I became bonded at a very deep level to all of God’s life. My cousins and a few of the neighborhood children began to come visit me, as I was caring for the calf.

“We connected at a heart level, and I quickly learned that life responds to love, usually in very unexpected ways.

“That lesson has been the guiding lesson for me throughout each day of my life.”

According to Evalyn Shea, who nominated The Rev. St. John for the award, “Shay lives this lesson — that life responds to love — in all that she does.”

Since coming to Unity Church of North Houston in November 2002, The Rev St. John has offered a unique Ministry Leadership Training Course, encouraging each participant to find her own ministry to pursue with love and passion.

Shea told us, “One of the ministries that has grown out of MLT classes include last year’s Community Angel Award winner, Lisa Wang, and Helping Hearts Resale Heaven, a love-offering-based thrift shop that gives the proceeds from the shop to women’s and pet shelters.”

Shea continued, “Another MLT success is ‘lovable dolls.’ Page Allen, an MLT graduate, had a vision in 2008 to develop a simple doll pattern that could be made from scraps of fabric. The dolls would be placed in the church to be loved, hugged and held, infusing the dolls with unconditional love to ‘share’ with the eventual recipients. Many people have made (and continue to make) the dolls, including Girl Scouts and people who don’t sew. Some of the dolls were given to cancer patients and others with special needs. Last November, 100 dolls were shipped on to a school in Jamaica for the children.”

The Rev. St. John, as you might expect, is also a noted and respected speaker, having given workshops, Sunday lessons and keynote addresses at churches and organizations around the country, including for the International New Thought Alliance.

The Rev. St. John leads a popular Women’s Retreat each spring, this year attracting participants from across Texas, Ohio and both the east and west coasts.

Diagnosed with Stage Four breast cancer in February 2006, The Rev. St. John never let the diagnosis or the treatment dampen her spirit. Instead, she used the experience and the healing to further her ministry, especially with cancer patients. Having been through the shock of a life-threatening diagnosis, the surgery, chemotherapy and its horrible side-effects, The Rev. St. John can now address this subject with true empathy.

Unlike many who keep their diagnosis and treatment private — almost as if it is something to be ashamed of — The Rev. St. John shared her diagnosis publicly, within days of receiving it. She is quick to speak to (and pray with) breast cancer survivor groups and others. Her story is moving and personal and her desire to help others intensely heartfelt.

“Shay contributes a regular column to *The Cypress Times*,” said Shea, “and she reaches out to the community in many other ways and forums. She has a way of explaining the Divine in terms we can understand and apply in our daily lives. Through humor and stories, she allows us to laugh, often at ourselves, and to find practical ways to practice loving one another on a daily basis in the real world, not just in church on Sunday. She is a very wise woman and so very worthy of this award.”

