

For All That Is Our Life
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I think First Church is that hammer, especially the part about love between brothers and sisters, and there aren't too many other organizations or businesses I could say the same thing about. I love this congregation and I love canvass season. This is a season when we speak about community and commitment and consider our gifts to this congregation in time, talent, and money. This is a season of joy and meaning of life and legacy. This is a season of hope and at least one good thing in this tired and confused world. This is a time to honor how much greater we are with our UU principles and purposes than we could ever be without them or as just individuals, at home on Sunday mornings, reading the paper alone.

This year we have seen the conclusion of our long planned and awaited renovation (applause and cheers please). On a daily basis, members, friends, and strangers stroll in here agog at what we dreamed and worked for and created. How do your spirit, mind, and heart lift when you walk through the front doors into a spacious foyer, bright coatroom, multi-purpose muscle room for our children, accessible restrooms, and miracle of miracle, an elevator. In its short one-month operational life I have seen the elevator used by parents with children, older adults, folks moving heavy equipment. And last week I saw it used by one of our teenagers in a wheelchair. For the first time he and his senior high classmates can meet upstairs in the beautiful senior high room which our beloved member, Jim Percival, wanted to belong to them. I watched this teenager use the elevator and I felt good, really good. This is what it means to be a caring UU community living our principles like the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." How much would you give for this kind of community?

Last Christmas Eve we sent our collection money to the Greater Islamic Center of Cincinnati of Clifton, still struggling from the pain and loss of two pipe bombs left on their doorstep during December. Because you are generous, it was the largest collection we have ever had on Christmas Eve, over \$600.00. We sent the letter to the mosque and I included a note affirming our certainty in their freedom to worship as they choose in this great county. We received such a beautiful thank you note from them just a week later

This great county of ours gives the right to worship and practice religion of one's choice . . . many like you have sent contributions for repairs. We appreciate it from our hearts and will never forget it. With friends like you we will recover from the losses and continue to pray for love and peace for all mankind. May God bless you. You are a sincere friend.

The letter concluded, “This will help mend our broken hearts.” How much would you give for this kind of religious community? Not one of hate and division, but love, peace, liberty, and justice for all.

This past year we also honored five of our most beloved members when they died, Duane Christy, Jack Griffith, Ed Lutton, Frank Homan, and Sallie East. It is human to love and human to mourn when a loved one dies. How many other places help you with this human task? How many organizations help you to gather with others, to hold the loss and find the meaning. Here we have sanctuary and refuge. The pain of our loved ones death is equaled by the joy that they ever lived, that we ever got to know them, to hear Sallie East say “My favorite song is Don’t Fence Me In.” To hear Frank’s quiet dignity and Ed’s wisdom. How many places provide you with the opportunity to meet and engage, to be transformed by such wonderful people? How much would you give for this kind of community?

Ed and Ginny Lutton’s son, Lou, wrote to me after Ed’s memorial service

Thank you for giving my dad such a warm, elegant, and emotional send-off and for enriching his life (and my mom’s) for so many years. And quite frankly, mine too. I often remember my years at First Church with nothing but the fondest memories and some huge and important lessons.”

How much would you give for this sort of legacy, these important lessons, this love and continuity? Our religious education programs provide the same lessons today, from childcare to the children’s choir to mentors and a trip to Boston for our senior high students. How much would you give for religious education programs that offer huge and important lessons that last a lifetime?

Lou is not our only graduate to say the same thing. This year Jack and Mary Griffith’s four daughters, raised as Unitarians, gave First Church a bequest of \$100,000 after their father died. Jack and Mary became ill too quickly to discuss their wishes with their children, so the Griffith’s four daughters voluntarily chose to give First Church such a generous gift. And all four of them came to our 175th celebration and were overjoyed to see the renovations, part of which has been paid for with this bequest. How much would you give to be part of a community that engenders so much stewardship and devotion?

And how could I fail to mention our other RE graduate, UUA President William Sinkford, who spoke here just two weeks ago. Lou, the Griffith daughters, Bill Sinkford, your children, represent decades of quality liberal religious education programming right here at First Church. In a country that can’t manage to tell our teenagers the truth about sexual development in public schools and struggles to put the 10 commandments on the front lawn (or not) of those same public schools (as well as creationism in the curriculum), how much would you give for real life lessons on love, intimacy, respect, science, religion, and diversity? We offer something here needed by our children that they can find no place else. How much would you give for this?

This year First Church has signed in twenty-four new members. We have started small groups thanks to the initiative of Dick Bozian and John Heideman. We hosted local Mennonites last weekend for a terrific workshop and worship service on art and social justice. By the way, I already received the kindest thank you note from them and

they loved our renovated building and want to return. During January and February our members and friends are tutoring teachers from China here to improve their English. Not only does this provide us with good rental income, but more importantly the cross-cultural exchange is magnificent. Thank you to the many volunteer teachers I have seen Lee Meyer, Carol Scott, Barb Rider, Betty Jean Mouk, Jean Schroer, Bev Baker, Mimi Gingold, Beth Duff, Morita Marmo – your efforts are amazing. I actually sat and spoke with these teachers about religion this week. They are atheists, religion is neither discussed nor encouraged in their country, and yet we had honest heart to heart discussions about religion. One of the teachers came up to me later and said in all sincerity, “I think I am a Unitarian Universalist.” Oh my goodness, it took my breath away; the power of our faith and purposes and principles. How much would you give to support a faith that respects the interdependent web of life and extends beyond expected borders?

We are also engaged in the exciting process of discussing issues like poverty, homelessness, raising the minimum wage, and public policy in the United States. We hosted a spontaneous meeting to discuss these issues on January 31 and there will be a follow-up on February 20. Please come. This was one of the most exciting and inspirational meetings I have been to at First Church. It is our real practice of our second principle, “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. W. H. G. Carter’s great-granddaughter, Starita Smith, just wrote to me after the most recent Carter service and thanked me for our continued work, saying that her great-grandfather would approve. How much would you give for a congregation that “talks the talk and sincerely does our best to walk the walk?”

And then there was the winter choral worship production of “Amahl and the Night Visitors.” They said it couldn’t be done, and our music director Kenny Smith did it anyway, with auditions, and rehearsals, and soloists from the congregation, including a very young and talented Rachel Chung - did I mention all the rehearsals? It was an incredibly moving worship service of music and drama and loss and hope and family and life. I cried and I saw you, you cried too. It was a gift. How much would you give for quality music programming that moves, challenges, and inspires?

I bet some of you are thinking, “Yeah, but you (that’s me) are going on a four month sabbatical this spring.” Well, I hope you take a bit of a sabbatical too, after you make your pledge, which is what I will be doing. Pledge first, sabbatical later. First Church is many things, including a model of work, play, sanctuary, rest, renewal, inspiration, challenge, and action. It is a model I uphold and I hope you uphold it too. Our faith life is not meant to exhaust us. It is meant to engage and nurture us. Take a rest, learn something new (as I will be doing with classes at UC) and return invigorated, which is my plan. The major beneficiary of my sabbatical is you, and the rested minister and quality worship services and programming you will receive from me. I already have some spokes in the fire for next fall – a gospel workshop with Bishop Todd O’Neal and the House of Joy, co-teaching another class with Rabbi Barr of Congregation Beth Adam. Plans are already underway.

And during my leave you will hear from all of the local UU ministers, at no cost. That is correct, they believe so much in this congregation, and in Unitarian Universalism, and in my ministry here, that they are donating their services for free. And I will do the same for them, if they ever go on sabbatical. This spreads our mission and values. And

other clergy, like the Reverend Doris Hoskins, co-minister at New Thought Unity, who several of you have been asking me to come here for over a year, will be in our pulpit on March 5 and she is terrific. She too is generously donating her sermon because she believes in our mission. The worship committee has lined up wonderful speakers. I am even now assisting Pete Rizzo with a sermon he will preach in March (don't you think Pete has a couple of sermons in him?) This is what a caring community does and I love you for this level of care, for myself and others. How much would you give for a community that cares and shares so well and believes in life long education for everyone?

In the next few weeks a member of the canvass committee will contact you. You may have already received an invitation. We are experimenting with something new this year – some of our members will be invited to a dinner and some will be contacted over the telephone. Regardless, every member will be contacted by another member to discuss their pledge. And here is where you really impress me. The level of stewardship is so high that we have enough canvassers so that no canvasser will need to canvas more than three people (that means we have almost 50 canvassers). Thank you to all of you wonderful volunteers. You are another reason I cherish this congregation. Whatever we do that has meaning, we do together.

If you haven't already, you will soon receive an informational canvass brochure in the mail. Please read it through and discuss it with your family members before you make a pledge. Inside it there is information on our programs, mission, budget, costs, and our new way to budget for operating costs and capital improvements. Our budget has increased by 9% this year, and almost all of this cost comes from our new mortgage to pay for the renovation. We knew this mortgage was coming, we knew its amount and we voted to accept it as a congregation. This is the last year our budget goes up to pay for renovation – this is our last renovation hurdle and we can do this.

I am not asking you to raise your pledge by 9%. I am asking, "Do you give your fair share?" Look at the giving guides inside the brochure. In my family we give almost 4% of our gross income, over \$3,000 a year. But that might not be the best way for you to think about giving. You might be on a fixed income, or have health care expenses, school loans to pay. The point is that everyone can give something. There are probably four people here who can't pledge \$50 a year, everyone else can and most of us could give \$500 a year (if we truly searched our hearts, pocket books and minds). And giving, giving something, is a stewardship value.

The charts inside the brochure tell us that 23 pledge units give under \$500, and another 25 pledge units give between \$500-\$1,000. If you make between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year this could be a good pledge. But if you make more than this, is this the year you can raise that pledge? (Do you make \$50,000 a year and pledge \$300). If so, thank you. If you give more than \$2,000, is this the year you are called to pledge more again? If so, thank you. If you have considered everything, already give until it feels good, and are keeping your pledge steady, thank you so much. If you need to decrease your pledge because you have had a loss of income, thank you for being a good steward and pledging. It is up to the rest of us to give more because we all help one another and we all create what is First Church together.

In college I pledged \$90 a year because my yearly income was \$6,000, that was all the money I had, and some other member made up the difference for me then. This year is different for me, but someone else here today can only pledge \$90 for a serious

reason (a divorce, college loans, multiple children in child care or college, or just multiple children, a business failure, being fired, flood or fire). These things happen and we need to help one another when they do. It is my turn and your turn to make up the difference, to give until it feels good, really good because we are generous people who believe in First Church, Unitarian Universalism, and all it stands for.

If you have been inspired by our renovation, our space, our mission, members and friends, our worship, a working heating and cooling system, our dedicated staff, our music, our religious education programs for adult and children, our social justice projects, our rites of passage, please give until it feels good. Give until it feels good for all that is our life.