

**“Who We Are Called To Be”**

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March 25, 2007

In the *New Testament* Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” I love this question. There is such deep meaning in being, seen, known, heard. Who do you say that I am? This is a question of identity, an inquiry into what others see as well as a challenge. Tell me who you believe me to be, and I will tell you if you have seen me.

As liberal religionists we believe that revelation is continuous, therefore the question of identity evolves. There is movement, energy, potential. Nothing is sealed. Identity is both reality and potential. We can both name who we are and who we want to be or believe we will become. And as Jurgen Moltmann informed us in his theology of Universalism, our belief about the future informs our actions, thoughts, and activities in the present. Not that we have entire control, but we can shape both present and future. “Who do you say that I am?” is a question, a challenge of present and future. As is the statement “Who We Are Called To Be.”

At this past week’s Board meeting, Board members discussed the inevitability of change, the power and potential of change, and the pain. To leave what is known and venture towards what could be is the hero’s journey. Which is why I almost fell out of my chair when I came back from my sabbatical in August and read the results of the new strategic plan which said that the majority of members wanted to grow, up to 100 more members? I wasn’t even here when you decided to go on this hero’s journey, and I found your call, your desire, your vision of who we are called to be, inspirational.

It’s no secret that I love my work and ministry here. In our nine years together we have continued to evolve, support, sustain, and challenge each other. And I love the people of this congregation, your sincerity, dedication, creativity, hard work, compassion, responsibility, and vision. I was and am moved by your vision of who we are called to be, celebrating our legacy and history, and committed to our engagement and purpose, you want to grow. How much would you give to a congregation that can name itself, evolve, care for itself and others? How much would you give to this mission and ministry?

When new members sign the book we ask that they give their time, talent, and treasure, this is what it means to be a committed steward. This morning we are here to celebrate the last part of this equation, treasure. How much we will give to be who we are called to be?

This is our 2007-2008 Stewardship Campaign Kick-off. First this service, followed by a luncheon where we invite you to pledge for our fiscal year beginning July 1, 2007, and ending June 30, 2008. Your pledge enables us to be who we are called to be. First Unitarian is entirely self-funded. We receive no money from the UUA or other association agencies. Part of the privilege and responsibility, the freedom of being a Unitarian Universalist and celebrating the values of liberal religion, is that we pay our own way. No denominational official can swoop down and relocate me to another parish.

No denominational body can inform us that this congregation will close or relocate. With congregational polity we make all these decisions ourselves. There is great power in this, and with power comes responsibility, so on a yearly basis we openly ask for pledges from our members.

Money is not secret at First Church. Money enables us to live our mission statement, so we openly talk of money here. I hope you will look at the canvass brochure for this year. It clearly sets out our goals, our operational costs, and what we want to fund to live our mission. Our budget for 2007-2008 is estimated to be \$356,250, a 5.5% increase over this year. This is a small increase and with it we hope to deepen our worship and programming, primary goals in our strategic plan.

The great news is that any pledges we collect over 5.5% will help us pay for other congregational priorities for the coming year, including a paid Youth Advisor (our youth need and are worth this expenditure – it is one of the most critical positions we will fund in the coming year), 12 month music director, increased budget for social justice and Odyssey (adult education offerings), and the music committee. How much would you give for a congregation committed to improved worship, improved religious education for children and adults, and enhanced social justice work that spreads our liberal religious values in the greater Cincinnati area?

We also hope to use extra money to fund organ and lower level restroom repair. The Board is hard at work getting estimates for work, particularly on the lower level restrooms which our children use, so that by May they can make a definitive decision on how much seed money can be given to both projects, priorities which you set. The initial estimate for the lower level restroom came in at \$80,000, and the Board being prudent, said “No, let’s go back and try to find another way.” With the help of John Scott, the Board is exploring a much more reasonable estimate (thanks to John for being creative and moving the process along). How much would you give for congregational leadership that listens to congregational concerns and searches for prudent, fair, timely ways to fund both our basic needs and our musical legacy?

Our canvass brochure also suggests a giving guide based on gross income, adjusted for things like child care, education costs, and care-of-parent expenses. This is a benchmark range for you to consider. If your adjusted gross income is \$40,000 a year, can you consider a pledge of \$1,300 a year? If your adjusted gross income is \$90,000, can you consider a pledge of \$4,500 a year? One third of our pledge units give less than \$1,000. If you are in this category, is this your year to challenge yourself to give more? If so, thank you. If you already give at a high level, perhaps 5% of your gross family income, thank you for your vision and generosity. Anyone who has ever worked on a budget knows that values are best demonstrated by financial bottom lines. How much would you give to be part of a community that believes in its mission enough to give until it feels good?

We also know that every year there are individuals and families who will not be able to pledge within the benchmark range. Perhaps your family is struggling to pay medical bills, college tuition, or you are facing job loss, or awaiting the arrival of twins. These members need our help. In other years they have paid for us, and now we will help them. This year I somewhat fall into this category. When I was part of a two wage earning household, my husband and I pledged 3.25% of our gross income. Now that I am a single head of household, I will be pledging 2.3% of my gross income. It is the best I

can do for 2007-2008. But I already have a goal and a plan to enable myself to pledge more in 2008 – 2009. Your pledge for this year is not the measure of you as a person or member. It is your pledge for this year. If you must be financially cautious this year to take care of yourself, please do so. We understand. If this is your year to challenge yourself to do more or to help someone else, please do so. Give until it feels good (not until it hurts).

First Church creates so much worth giving to. Last Sunday afternoon I watched Mimi Gingold, head of our Social Justice Committee facilitate a succinct, organized, energized training for First Church and the many other congregations that will help us host IHN guest families for four weeks this spring. I watched the members of other congregation leave the training saying “You really do great work here. Working to eradicate homelessness is important. You are living your values and our values. We like working with you.” How much would you give to support a congregation that lives its mission statement and partners with others in an interfaith effort?

Two weeks ago I attended a rehearsal for our spring production of *Godspell*. Perhaps you are like my sister and ask “You are producing what? I thought you weren’t Christian!” Our Music Director Kenny Smith has a vision (this man always has a musical vision!) that every world religion teaches a lesson of merit, that our members and friends appreciate quality music, and that Unitarians can skip. Really, there is one part where Kenny wants us to skip in the aisle, and for this alone the production is worth it. How much would you give to see Unitarians skip? How much would you give for an energized, uplifting musical worship performance that attracts choir members and many who have never sung with our choir?

This past year I taught a four-session class on Arabic Women Novelists, and then later in the winter had my professor from the University of Cincinnati come back to speak on the topic. Over thirty of you attended this class and our conversation and questions were rich. Next fall I hope to have Professor Cadora return with others to speak on Sunni Shi relations. There is extra money in the budget to bring more qualified speakers on a variety of topics. How about a comprehensive sexuality educator who can answer our pressing, adult questions on how to talk to our kids about sex, boundaries, and safety? How about a world religion series with a variety of speakers or speakers from the psychoanalytic institute? How much would you give for quality religious education programming?

We are also enhancing worship, a major goal of the strategic plan. In the last year we purchased copies of the new blue hymnal we sang from last week. Later this spring I will be training a team of professional worship welcomers. This year we experimented with combining some worship services with adult and children’s religious education. Next year we will do this again, only more often. How much would you give for integrated, thought-provoking worship that deepens our liberal religious faith?

Recently a new member, Lisa Gutman volunteered to send sermons once a month to our shut-in members, members who are ill or frail or recovering from surgery or injury. Many of these members have been with us for years. They gave to us and for us in good years and bad, and now that they are not as strong, it is our turn to take care of them. Members of our Extended Ministry Committee visit folks, as do, I, but it is also really nice to receive a sermon that can be read, and considered. And in my opinion, even nicer to receive them from someone they don’t personally know, but who by her

effort demonstrates that we care for one another whether or not we know one another. This is my idea of creating the beloved community here on earth. I also want to thank our Volunteer Service Coordinator, Ray Sinclair, for making this and many other connections in the past year between our new members and First Church. It can take a while to get integrated here, and we care that our new members know how to find their way into our sometimes confusing systems.

We are called to be many things – Unitarian Universalists, loving, compassionate, evolving, curious, free, accepting, mission based, organized, goal oriented, dedicated, responsible, honest, fun, healthy, and fair. No one person is First Unitarian Church. Together we are First Unitarian Church. Together we are community. Together we offer our time, talent, and treasure. There is simply no other place where I would rather be. If you agree with me, please give until it feels good so that we may be all we are called to be. May it always be so.

