

“Filling Our Spirits by Raising the Green”

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My experience with this congregation has been the best of my life of church experiences . . . and that’s a lot of years. I love the combination of heart and mind exhibited in so much of what we do, and I’ve not found so many good and lovable people in one group for years. Even as much as I know that it is time to “return home to the ocean,” I have some tears about leaving . . . In all this I will especially miss you as a pastor and leader.”

-Sue Shidaker

Sue emailed these words to me before she left for Washington State last fall. “I love the combination of heart and mind exhibited in so much of what we do, and I’ve not found so many good and lovable people in one group for years.” This is First Church and these are the sentiments that you share with me year in and year out. Something special happens here.

There is our mission statement which we read every Sunday “Our urban Unitarian Universalist community celebrates and supports one another on our spiritual and ethical paths. We work for justice, dignity, and respect for the web of life.” There is the staff, a wonderful collection of talent and ability. There are the programs, classes and activities. And then there are the people. As our canvass brochure asks this year, “First and most important, consider what First Church means to you. Where would you be without it? Where would we be without this place and these people? Oh sure we fuss and fight sometimes, that’s human. There are over 300 of us here.

But in our efforts, our faces, our conversations, our shared celebrations and mourning, our car pools, our social justice projects, our classes, our greetings and partings, something special happens here. We sit at the bedside of the sick, we share food, we celebrate good times, births, and graduations, and comings and goings, we mourn the loss of loved ones, like Mike Marmo, together, so that no one is alone. At First Church we give and get help for rides, meals, visits, cards. We care for one another, and in an increasingly mobile and separated world, this is rare and precious. How much would you give for this kind of community?

I love canvass season, the time when our members and friends give pledges to support First Church in the coming fiscal year, because it is an opportunity to remember, to name, to cherish what is special here, and to give once again to its continued creation and preservation. To begin with, I would like to ask members of the Finance (Dick) and Canvass Committees (Lyn and Denise) and our Treasurer (Bob) to stand so that we can thank you for your work preparing our budget and canvass. Thank you. Now I would

like to ask all our volunteer canvassers to stand so that we may thank you. Look at all these friendly faces. One of them may canvass you. Thank you for serving

There are two ways to canvass this year; one is to read the canvass brochure that will be mailed to you this week and then wait for the phone call from your friendly canvasser. The other way to canvass is immediately after this service. You will be treated to a fantastic lunch courtesy of Eileen Broughton, a canvass brochure full of information and pictures, and then the blessed opportunity to pledge on the spot. We make it easy for you! It's a fun and motivational event.

Many of you probably entered the sanctuary with a number in your head, your potential pledge for the coming year. For the next two hours at least I want you to hold that number; listen to this sermon, feel worship, eat lunch, listen to more facts, then see what number you want to pledge. Some of you will want to go home first and talk it over. What we ask is that you respond to your canvasser and meet in the next three weeks so that we can conclude the canvass and get on with our mission. We need your response in order to do that, so answer the call, make your pledge and let's get going.

For those of you who are new, canvass season comes around every spring. New members are canvassed within a month of joining, but the rest of us are canvassed once a year, in March. During this time, members and friends consider their pledges for the coming fiscal year, which begins on July 1, 2008 and concludes on June 30, 2009. You may of course, pay whatever you like in advance, but you will not be billed until this summer when the fiscal year begins. We make it even easier for you and ask how you would like to pay, monthly, quarterly, in one lump sum? This is all up to you. What we ask is that you think through what you receive from First Church, and what you can afford to give from July 1 through the following June, and then give until it feels good.

First Church is entirely self-funded. What we raise among ourselves is what we have to spend on our mission, programs, staff, and maintenance. Our budget for the fiscal year 2007-2008 (which we are still in) was \$366,000, \$325,000 from member pledges. For the coming year (2008 – 2009), we are looking for a budget of \$388,000, \$348,000 from member pledges, which represents a responsible 7.3% increase over the past year (10% increase a year is considered healthy). All our finances are transparent at First Church. This budget will be voted on at the May meeting, and we regularly print out spread sheets that show where every dollar goes – every member has access to this information. You can find my salary, committee budgets, the cost of health care for employees, our electric bill. It is all transparent and accountable.

As you heard just this morning through the work of the RE Committee and Personnel we have hired a talented new Director of Education, Becky Johnson. Becky is a graduate of a UU seminary, Starr King in California, she was raised as a Unitarian, and she will work **full time** (which is an increase in hours for our Director of Religious Education in the 2008-2009 budget). I want to thank the Board for their leadership in this area, realizing how much religious education means to the ministry and mission of First Church.

How much would you give for a new, full time Director of Religious Education who can and will build on the great work done by our current DRE, Carly Wise? I was extremely pleased that First Church attracted a candidate of this caliber. Becky is currently completing a social justice internship at First Parish in Concord, Massachusetts, and having worked there myself as a ministerial intern, I can tell you that Concord only

selects the best seminary candidates. It is an extremely talented and demanding teaching congregation.

In addition, when I interviewed Becky I discovered that she has a deep interest in social justice (some of you may remember her preaching here 4 years ago after her arrest and imprisonment for protesting the School of the Americas) and lifespan adult education (education for children and adults). She also has the ability and interest to periodically preach here. How wonderful to hear another seminary trained professional preach about our children, social justice, education, and the world as she sees it. How much would you give to have a **full time** DRE with these credentials?

In this past year our pledges presented a production of Godspell. Folks said it couldn't be done, but our Music Director, Kenny Smith, had a vision. The old joke is that the last time "Jesus Christ" was said in a Unitarian church was when the custodian slipped and fell. Kenny knew that there is a message to Godspell that Unitarians can embrace, which we did. Do you remember Andy (Jesus) and Al (Judas) singing together. Do you remember Jennifer hitting that high A, or Glenetta and Rachel singing together? Do you remember the full house for the evening performance? How much would you give to create a congregation that embraces musical diversity, showcases congregational talent, has an adult and children's choir, and experiments with new forms of music? In the budget for the coming year the Music Director's job, instead of lasting 10 months as it currently does, is increased to year round (now granted Kenny may be on tour in August . . .) How much would you give for improved music throughout the worship year?

In the past year Odyssey, our Adult Education has worked to restructure itself and provide more programming. We have paid for speakers on Judaism, and later this spring, Islam. Published author and national speaker, Neil Chethik, came and spoke on men's issues and the lives of couples (of any gender). This coming year we are arranging to have the Reverend Hal Porter come and teach an eight session class on the New Testament Gospels, because year after year the members here have so many questions about Christianity and its development. How much would you give for a deeper exploration of Christianity from a respected, liberal Christian minister? How much would you give for increased and improved adult programming?

Carly and I have just finished co-teaching a class on "Parents as Spiritual Guides," attended by 20 members and visitors. Comments at the final class on what was learned included "I knew more than I thought I did," and "I'm not alone with my questions," and "It's good to talk to other parents about our struggles." How much would you give for a congregation that provides these opportunities for families, parents, and children?

This year our worship theme has been world religions. We welcomed a Buddhist monk to our pulpit and listened to Rabbi Barr preach here on Christmas Eve. This was dynamic, innovative, thought-provoking and moving worship. Next year our worship theme will be Unitarian Universalist history and identity. Next year, as this year, we will match children's and adult education to sermons and services. How much would you give for a congregation that takes the time to explore other faiths as well as its history and theology in coordinated music, classes, and worship for children and adults? This type of programming involves staff that understands and responds to the needs of members and

visitors in a changing, diverse world. How much would you give for this level of staff and programming?

This past year we also had the opportunity to begin hosting clients from the Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN). These are pre-screened, homeless families in transition. Our experiences with IHN have been well-coordinated and at times deeply challenging on an intellectual and emotional level. Homelessness is deeply disturbing and challenging issue. I want to thank our Social Justice committee for their leadership in creating this kind of social justice opportunity. A life of faith needs to be challenging as well as comforting. We also funded summer Peace Camps in Avondale, something you will learn more about on March 30th. They were an over-subscribed success, helping children stay off the streets and learn about positive conflict resolution during the summer when more people are out and crime increases. We are funding more camps this summer.

In addition, First Church won a Police Collaborative Award for our work with CeaseFire Cincinnati. In the last year since CeaseFire was formed, violent crime in Avondale has significantly dropped. Thank you to everyone who attended vigils, canvassed neighborhoods and took a stand to decrease violence in our urban community. How much would you give for a congregation that lives its mission and has the respect of its urban neighbors for living our Unitarian Universalist values, and for making positive change in a conservative city? How much would you give for this because it is rare, so rare, and so precious?

There are many benchmarks for giving. The UUA suggests a progressive giving guide, so that the more you make, the higher percentage you give. The UUA suggest that an individual or family who makes \$30,000 a year contribute \$800 to \$1200 a year. Someone who makes \$100,000 a year contribute \$5,000 - \$5,700 a year. This understands that individuals with lower incomes cannot give as high a percentage of their income as those who make more money. But everyone can give something. There is no one here who can't give \$10 in the coming year, so everyone will be canvassed. It would be insulting not to ask, because stewardship and generosity are values that we want to share, that we want everyone to be able to partake in here.

Some of us may be limited this year due to multiple children in day care or college, job loss, divorce, business loss, health care expenses or some other circumstance. We understand this. That is why the rest of us will pledge more, to make up the difference, for when we have bad years in the future. Do you understand this?

Last year I lowered my pledge, one of the few times in ten years because I was getting divorced and my household income changed. This year I will be pledging more, and I am happy, delighted, ecstatic to do it. Thank you to those who pledged more to cover me and others like me last year. Really, thank you. This year I will cover someone else.

My gross income is approximately \$64,000 a year, and I will offer 2.5% of my gross income to First Church for a pledge of \$1600 this year. I have a theory that if everyone here gave at least 2.5% of their income we would exceed our canvass goal every year. Can you do that this year? Can you? If you had a great financial year – sold your business, did well in the stock market, received an inheritance, can you give 6% of your income? What would you give for this special, rare congregation, faith, liberal

values, and mission? If you gave a lot last year or will be this year, thank you, thank you, and thank you.

I know some of you are looking at me like “It was an awful year in the stock market?” Friends, first it is never an awful year for everyone. Second, did you really need your wealth in the market this year, or in the next five or even ten years? If you didn’t, and most of us don’t, the stock market always cycles up and down. That is what it does, making money over time. Unless your house, education, job, or retirement is at stake, it is perceived wealth, not real wealth. Sure my pension took a loss, like money periodically does in the market, but I don’t need it for the next twenty years. It is what it is and we still have a vital mission here, and I am on better financial ground than I was last year, and I finally finished paying off my seminary loans this month (after 10 years), and feel grateful and want to share, and someone worse off than me needs money to attend a Peace Camp.

We have a lot of members. One third of our pledging members give \$1000 or less a year. If you are in this range, can you give more this year? Maybe you can’t give at the UUA guidelines, at or 2.5% of your gross income, but can you increase your pledge by \$100 or \$300. My favorite mixed coffee drink cost \$4.15. Multiply that by 52 weeks and you have over \$200. Multiply that coffee drink by 2 by 52 weeks and you have \$430. Can you have one or two less coffee drinks a week and give to something that lasts more than 15 minutes? Think about it.

Whatever you give, thank you. If we raise over 7.3% we can start to do some really wonderful things like host an off-site all church retreat, add to the already generous donation we have by one member to air condition the sanctuary (thank you for your generosity anonymous member or members), pay for much needed staff and lay leadership training, implement some of the Green Team recommendations for energy efficiency (off course we want to do this but it costs money!), replace outdated religious education furnishings, and more. There is so much we can do together. If you give \$100, thank you. If you give \$1,000, thank you. If you give \$5,000, thank you. I believe in this congregation, its people, and mission. It is a privilege and a pleasure to serve here. Now it is time for all of us to fill our spirits and mission by raising the green. Please give until it feels good.

