



### **Putting People First**

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What does First Church mean to you? And what is possible here in 2009-2010? Before I go further I want you to think about these two questions, really think about them. What does First Church mean to you? And what is possible here in 2009-2010?

I ask because our mission statement says “Our urban Unitarian Universalist congregation celebrates and supports one another on our spiritual and ethical paths. We work for justice, dignity, and respect for the web of life.” What do we need here in the coming year, and what do our neighbors and this world need from us in the coming year? So that we can partake of our life giving mission statement we have some vital work, creative thinking, help, and community sharing ahead of us. 2009-2010 is a great time to give, participate, and share at First Church.

One of the things I like most about this congregation is how we put people first. It is our heritage and our legacy. Last fall we gave a standing ovation to our former Music Director, who spontaneously announced from this pulpit at the end of Welcoming Congregation Sunday, that he is gay. When he made this announcement he received a standing ovation from everyone here. It was one of my proudest moments to be a Unitarian Universalist, and one of my most satisfying moments in ministry. It felt good to be here, to be us – living our faith here, respecting and affirming one another as we search for identity and meaning in this life.

Recently I asked a member what this congregation means to her. She replied,

We accept people as they grow and change. When I came years ago I was a parent with an infant. Then I worked in religious education, found social contacts and political relief. When I divorced I found out I was still “one of us.” You can change here. If I had been a member at another church I would probably have had to leave because I was divorced. When I had a party to celebrate my new home I invited everyone I knew. Work didn’t come. Book club didn’t come. Old friends didn’t come. The church came – lots of them.

Just last month the co-chairs of our Extended Ministry Committee, Fran Turner and Morita Marmo, and our Pastoral Caregiver, the Reverend Annie Foerster, explained to us why they co-chair the biggest committee in the church. Extended ministry sends cards, visits people, makes meals, shares a laugh and a shoulder and everyone here is a member. Morita told us she received pastoral care from many people here including a 5 year old and 98 year old after the death of her husband last year. That is what we do here. When you are sick or in trouble: you are not alone.

This past year we hired the Reverend Annie Foerster to help minister with the biggest committee in the church. Together we keep track of our members who cannot get out, who are hospitalized or in crisis, who need a friend. Annie and I meet regularly and share names of members who need help. We had grown so big one minister couldn't do the job anymore. What can you give to continue this level of pastoral care?

One of the greatest joys of congregational life and work is that we have the ability to respond to community needs, like a recession. Just this past week I scheduled a meeting with staff and lay leaders who coordinate pastoral care, education, music, and social activities. Our meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, March 31 at 7 and anyone interested is invited to attend. We have one item on the agenda, "What can First Church do in terms of community building and education to help members celebrate and support one another in the coming year?" One person suggested potluck, picnic, and games which I think are great ideas, ways to celebrate and support each other in harder times. I am working out how to use the series "Repossessing Virtue" from *Speaking of Faith* with Krista Tippett to engage us in conversation on what matters throughout the coming year. Tippett asked a variety of notable guests - theologians, artists, and scientists - to discuss where they find virtue, morality, and meaning during difficult financial times. Their responses are truly awesome and comforting and I want us to engage with them. We are open to other ideas as well. Come if you are interested - March 31 at 7PM.

In addition, on the suggestion of a member, I have begun talking with the Board and Finance about creating a Minister's Discretionary Fund. Most ministers have such a fund that they use. It's just not something we have done here. This member who first approached me said that she had money to share and didn't anticipate being in financial distress this coming year, so she wondered if she could give me money to share with people who come to me in distress. This got me thinking.

There are probably other people here with money to share. There are people here with financial needs. Wouldn't it be wonderful if First Church could confidentially create a place for people to give and receive? I would have the discretion to disburse money to members in need (screening would be that you are a member). This would also encourage members to come to Annie and I to tell us of their needs, so that they are not alone or afraid or isolated. It would build community.

It feels great to know that you have helped someone. It feels great to know that someone cared enough to help you. We don't need to know the personal names. We just need to know that someone cared and someone helped. This lives our values of celebration, support, justice, dignity, and respect in a world that can feel impersonal. I will let you know later this spring if we get this program started.

Our congregational mission and message also help members, friends, and visitors live their best lives. This past year I received a letter from someone planning to become a member. He explained "I have left every service . . . motivated to "spend" my time, to

“live like I were dying,” and to recommit to the doing of the tiny decent things. I was touched by this letter – the tiny, decent things. Yes, so much of what we do is tiny, but if it is decent, it is vast. It is everything.

A parent told me that her son recently discovered that pork comes from pigs. Her son was horrified and the first thing he said was “Everyone has a voice. Pigs have a voice. It’s the fifth principle.” It took her a minute to realize that her son was talking about our fifth principle. In adult language this principle says that we affirm and promote “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Our children learn it as “All people need a voice.” Now, this child included pigs with people, which I found incredibly touching. What I also realized with amazement, is that faced with a moral crisis, this boy used his religious education from First Church to help him make meaning and possibly protest. Our children are learning tiny, decent things that will shape their lives and this world forever. How much can you give to continue this legacy?

Our religious education program for children is growing, up in attendance over 15% this year, so we have hired more teachers to give greater continuity in the classroom, particularly as we have gone to two services. We are currently hiring a junior high school teacher. The attendance in our children’s choir is about to overtake the attendance in our adult choir. In fact, we are talking about having two separate children’s choirs, one at 9AM and one at 11AM because attendance is so high. Isn’t that amazing? Two children’s choirs? How much would you give to continue this growth?

Next week our guest speaker in the pulpit is Karen Dabdoub from the Council of American Islamic Relations. She is a Muslim, a wonderful human being, and she chooses to cover her hair. Think for a minute how unique this experience is in a world struggling with diversity and shared humanity. Her presence lives our values (several principles and sources). How much would you give in the coming year to build interfaith community and build religious literacy?

One of the things I treasure most about First Church is that our programs and money go for more than just ourselves. For the third year in a row, for four weeks we will house guests from IHN (Interfaith Hospitality Network). These are homeless families, parents/or guardians and children, who would be on the street if we, and other congregations, did not provide them with housing. The current recession and mortgage crisis will make more families homeless this year, not less. These are our neighbors and we are part of an interdependent web of life (and economy). How much would you give to help with such a vital ministry?

In addition the Social Justice Committee will be funding an extra week of Peace Camps in Avondale this summer (raised over \$1,000 for this on Christmas Eve this last year), the staff and interested lay members are coordinating the biggest Pride Day participation ever this coming June, the Carter Committee offers money to women and children in need, and the Refugee Committee supports and helps the refugee families we have partnered with from Kosovo and Sudan. I am extremely proud of the social justice programming we manage at First Church. How much would you give to continue it? How much would you give to be part of it?

I regularly find it a privilege to be part of this community. Sure there are problems and mistakes. This is a human enterprise after all. But we are trying, really

trying, to live the values of our mission statement and we do not just good things, but great things.

Our total budget for this year is just over \$410,000. We are entirely self-funded, so every dollar comes from our members. The budget for 2009-2010 is bigger than last year because we are growing in membership and programs. The cost of two Sunday morning services, which has made services more pleasant for almost everyone (we can hear during the coffee hour, there is a seat in the sanctuary), is a very small percentage of the total budget, less than 4% -that's it. We have increased costs due to the security guard we have on Sunday mornings, which we will continue because we value safety. We have more paid teachers in religious education because we are growing, and Reverend Annie Foerster joined us to help with pastoral care, and reorganization because we are growing. In the coming year we would like Reverend Foerster to continue with pastoral care and manage our adult education programs (our current chair has said this would be a great relief) and our small group ministry program which we would like to restart this summer after a brief hiatus (explain how important these are).

There are several benchmarks to consider pledging. It takes over \$1,100 per member per year to sustain this congregation. That is one benchmark, but not the best one. I pledge 2.5% of my gross income. I did that last year, I will do that this year. So my pledge will be \$1,660 for the coming year. Some people can pledge a larger percentage (3% - 5%) than this because they make more money. Some people can pledge a smaller percentage (1% - 2%) because they make less money.

I asked the Board not to give me any sort of a raise this year. Somewhere our dear member, Charles Weilbaker who died last year, is very upset with me. The one time I saw him angry with me was when I suggested a reduction in my income. He was so upset with me he shook his finger at me during a Board meeting and said he didn't ever want to hear me say that again. But I think Charles, who grew up with many siblings in the Depression, might understand that sometimes the team needs to pull together and pinch a penny. Any sort of raise for me adds to the budget, and I want First Church to stay lean this year while retaining all its programs and staff. I want us to be fiscally responsible so I took my raise off the table. That is how much I believe in our mission. I hope that next year at this time we are moving out of the recession. But this year, we have so many important things to do and we need everyone here to help to the best of their ability.

Every year there are members here who can not pledge much money because of unemployment or underemployment, because of health problems, family changes, student expenses, or this year, significantly reduced fix incomes. If you are one of these people I ask you to pledge something, say \$50, because pledging is a stewardship value, and once you have given, you have given what you could like everyone else. Everyone can give something. I hope you feel great about contributing, and please, please do not spend a minute more thinking about how much you gave. If you are in financial distress, let us help you this year. We are here in this community to celebrate and support.

For those of us with sustainable incomes, please consider your pledge. We need a generous donation from you now more than ever, to fund our programs, services, education, staff, and building – to continue the mission of this congregation that puts people first. There is a brunch after the 9AM service and a lunch after the 11AM service where you can learn more and pledge on the spot, which makes everything easier for you.

If we don't hear from you in a couple of days, a canvasser will call you. (If you pledge early you will not be called). Please respond promptly to your canvasser, who is a member just like you, someone who will understand if you have financial limitations, someone who wants to complete his/her calls so we can complete the pledge drive.

When pledging ask yourself "What does First Church mean to me?" and "What is possible here in 2009-2010," and then please give until it feels good. I think we are going to have a great and important year.