



Our Mission: Our Ministry

Reverend Sharon Dittmar
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, OH 45244
(513) 281-1564
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From you I receive, to you I give
Together we share, and from this we live

Last week I saw Eric Clapton, who will be known after we are all dead as one of the three greatest guitarists of the 20th century. Think Paganini or Yoyo Ma. People will speak these musical names long after we are gone. They represent a transcendent musical union, a rare gift we are able to but briefly hear.

Mr. Clapton kept thanking the audience. Eric Clapton, thanking the audience. Perhaps at some point in your life you just realize that the only relevant response is gratitude and generosity.

Brad Leeper writes “Generosity is a spiritual issue of the heart. A person cannot move toward spiritual maturity until he or she understands that “where your treasure is, there your heart will also be.” Mr. Leeper also insists that for too long congregations have relied on notions of “stewardship,” of doing the right thing to support the congregation. What we are missing, according to him, is a deeper and transformative conversation about the struggle and value of generosity. He writes “The last frontier in American Christianity is the conversation about money. Spiritual transformation’s last obstacle is the wallet.” If you are thinking this does not apply to us because we are Unitarian Universalists, I suggest your reconsider.

When I was in seminary, the President of my home congregation said to me “Ministers come and go, but congregations remain.” I have thought long about these words and their truth, especially for congregations, like ours, that exercise congregational polity. Congregational polity is this privilege and responsibility we inherited from our Puritan forbearers. It gives you the people many rights, to call a

minister, set a budget, move, open, or close a congregation, elect your own trustees, the privilege of self governance, something our Catholic neighbors only dream about.

Last week I was at a clergy meeting and I said that “Money makes you real.” I immediately qualified and said “Not in a spiritual sense, but in an organizational sense.” My colleagues, though much more orthodox, already knew what I meant. I was surprised I did not need to qualify. The bottom line of dollars tells us what we can and cannot do. Dollars are the bottom line, and so I ask you, as the congregation who remains, where your heart is?

And by the way I am not going anywhere (that I know of) so please don't be distracted by that bunny trail. I will be doing another version of this sermon next year and the year after.

Dollars are the bottom line, and so I ask you, as the congregation who remains, where your heart is? I ask you because the answer impacts our mission. I ask you too because I have an eye on your spiritual/religious development. If you find your heart here, how much will you give to live this for yourself and others? Brad Leeper suggests, and I believe he is correct, that my role is to “inspire you to live above the roar of or consumer-driven machine.”

Consumption, heart. Consumption, heart. Two very different things. Leeper writes “In the secret places of the heart, people do not long to be good stewards. They do long to make an impact. To be a difference maker. To be generous to the point of giving up something that is good in exchange for something that is better.”

At First Church we are about difference and better. Tom Sherwood, our Music Director, told me this story from children's choir. Last fall when the children were learning the song “I am a Unitarian,” one the boys burst out “I love that song. I want to sing it all the time every day. I want to sing it forever.” Tom replied, “You are in love. That is what love is and you love a piece of music.” How much would you give to have our children fall in love with music and Unitarian Universalism? We changed a life through music.

Recently I received a note from an adult whose parent, a long time member of this congregation, recently died. This son of one of our members wrote to me “One particularly enlightening aspect of the Estate work has been my interactions with various charitable organizations. Some positive. Some extremely negative . . . But of all of them, my interactions with the Unitarian Universalist Association, both at the national and local (First Church) levels, have been uniformly wonderful and heads above every other organization.” This adult went on to say that he would gladly take

his mother's place if he lived in town. We treat our members and their family members and friends better than others, particularly in times of pastoral crisis and need, because we live by our mission and 7 principles. We put people first, over and over again, and in a time of need changed the life of someone whose mother just died. How much would you give to be part of a congregation that puts people first?

A member recently wrote to me, "Mostly, I have felt confirmed in my beliefs, when listening to your sermons. I also feel reassured by the words of certain hymns. On several occasions I have gotten so choked up I couldn't sing. The light streaming in through the eastern window, the leaping vault of the arches in the sanctuary, my awareness of the presence of like-minded people all around me . . . I've certainly felt compassion for the people you've told us about. And that may be one of the reasons that I come and listen: To be re-confirmed in my compassion for humanity." How much would you give to be part of a congregation with like-minded people, and re-confirms your compassion for humanity?

And recently I received this note from our Heartland UU District Executive,

Sharon,

I just read your newsletter column, and I am so thankful and impressed and proud of the work that you are doing in your Avondale community, and the congregation for allowing you the time and space for doing so. It is so important for us to be the best neighbors we can be, not only so people might flock to our congregations (we hope), but more because it is the right thing to do: to look out for where we are rooted, and make it a better place.

I hope that you will share with your leadership, congregation members, and Rev. Foerster my deep and abiding thanks for all that you are doing to serve and protect your neighborhood.

How much would you give to support a congregation known for making a positive difference in Avondale through our work with IHN, Peace Camps, the Wesley Education Center, 2010 Census, Ceasefire, last year's Pride Parade (with more to come), and employment for former felons who have paid their dues and need work to sustain their families? This is not easy work and it is not fast. It requires patient relationship building. In August we are hosting an Avondale ecumenical service here at First Church with our neighbors from other congregations – for one day, Sunday morning won't be the most segregated hour of the week (as Whitney Young Jr. said).

How much would you give to make social justice decisions and do work that changes lives (ours included)? How much would you give to be a difference maker?

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Where is your treasure? Where is your heart? We live in a roaring consumer driven machine that challenges our minds and hearts every day. Recently the Finance Committee came to the startling realization that over 30 members of this congregation pledge nothing, zero. There was some relief when we realized that 12 of these individuals are new members and have not had a chance to pledge. But still, 24 people pledging nothing, not \$5, not \$50, not \$100.

Finance is very sensitive to the fact that some of our members could be suffering financially. We do not want anyone to financially harm themselves. But when 1 in 10 members pledges nothing, we also wonder if we have fostered a climate of generosity, showed people the gift of giving. From you I receive, to you I give. Your generosity changes lives, or not (equally your own). If you pledged nothing last year, and are concerned about finances, could you pledge \$100 this year (that would be \$8 a month, one movie ticket, or two lattes, or 2+ Happy Meals, or a six pack of beer)? We want your heart here. I want your heart here. It feels good to give until it feels good.

When I was in seminary I made \$6,000 a year. Now I had no children to support, but I was putting myself through school and had lots of debt. In those years I pledged, as I still do, 2.5% of my gross income, which was \$90, and I slept great. Financially that was what I could give. Actually, if everyone here gave 2.5% of their gross income we wouldn't even need to have a pledge drive. It would be done. I want to pause so that everyone can calculate 2.5% of their gross income in their heads. Find that number and consider.

Over 100 members pledge less than \$1000 a year. My guess is that some people are not even pledging 1% of their gross income. Please consider where your heart is, for your sake. Where is your money going? Do you need an ipad more than a changed life? Please, where is your heart? The life you change may be your own.

I have a frustration, and that is that it is not our culture for the minister to know who pledges what. I think the concern is that I will be biased against people who don't give a lot. May I ask you to reconsider. My heart is larger than that. When I don't know the numbers I don't know who to help. When we started the minister's discretionary fund I called around to find out who needed financial help. I really had little idea, and some people paused and asked me “Why are you calling me.” I didn't want to offend. I didn't know who to help. We don't know who to help. Wow.

Here's another problem. I don't know who to thank. Who are those top 5 donors? I don't know. Whoever you are, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Please don't assume the top five donors are millionaires. That is not how it pans out in congregational giving. Generosity is state of mind, not income. About ten years ago we had a "renegade" canvass chair who showed me pledge numbers. I can't remember who pledged nothing, but here's what I learned. I did not even know the top three donors. Wow. Anyone who does fundraising can tell you that is a mistake.

Here's the other thing I learned from the numbers, there are people without a lot of money, or who had financial burdens, who pledged a lot – the single parent, renter, with two kids who pledged \$1,500 a year, the elderly retired couple living in a simple house, giving \$4,000 a year, the 30 something single man who pledged \$3,000 a year. It made my jaw drop and I felt such gratitude and awe. I wanted to be able to thank these people and ask them why they give. What do they believe? Because I don't see numbers I can't ask. I can't find out what motivates generosity here. Friends, it is your church. It is so your church. Can we really have a conversation about generosity here? Can we really? The life you change may be your own.

Last year our pledge drive did not enable us to afford an assistant minister. There is no human way one minister can do all the ministry here. Without Reverend Foerster, I would be forced to make the choice between doing social justice work or pastoral care, and I would have to choose pastoral care, and it would be an awful choice, but we can't leave our own behind. If we can't love ourselves we cannot love another. Or maybe I would just make you pick. Which part of ministry would you rather I not do? Frankly, if that happened I would rather if you picked.

But here is why you astound me. Last year, when the pledge was short and Reverend Foerster would not be able to stay, the Board made some calls and within one week, one week, \$13,000 was raised. Wow. That is generosity. I was floored when I was given the news. Deeply, deeply grateful. A few generous people stepped forward to help this congregation and all the people served by what we do. Wow. Of course, I don't know who made the donations, so I do not know who to thank. I don't know who gives to the minister's discretionary fund, so I don't know who to thank. But thank you. Really, thank you.

And could we, as a congregation pledge until it feels good, just do it the first time around so we don't need to worry, make cuts or special calls (actually we agreed not to make "special calls" this year). It takes approximately \$1250 per member per year to maintain our ministry, which is growing to serve our growing membership. In the last year we have restarted small groups, our Music Director is working on getting more members to give musical offerings (like today which takes relationship building

and time but we are getting there), Reverend Foerster is jump starting adult education, I have had more time for social justice work in the city, we have more paid RE teachers so you volunteer less time in the classroom and spend more time in worship. Most of our budget is staff – 70% (check your brochure). Our profit here is transformed lives. That is the product here.

I know that financially some of us took a hit last year. Some of us just take financial hits in any given year. On a regular basis it is hard for a lot of our young families with children, and our elderly members on fixed incomes. We understand. Give what you can, until it feels good.

If you pledged nothing last year, please just consider pledging \$100 for the year. For your spiritual development I hope you will give something. For the rest of us, go by the benchmark of \$1250 per member, or 2.5% of your gross income (or a smaller percentage if you make less than \$40,000 a year or a larger percentage if you make over \$150,000).

Let's take the mystery out of generosity. Give until it feels good. Put your treasure where your heart lies, and if it lies in daily lunch at Gold Star, please reconsider, for your sake, and that of the world.

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