

## “Joyful Giving: A Challenge in Two Parts”

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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What a joy it is to see you all here today!  
I'd like to address our visitors right away,  
because my sermon today  
is all about the financial stewardship of our church,  
and this is really a task for people who have committed  
to being around for a while. .  
If you are visiting today,  
rest assured that we are not asking you to make a major financial gift  
to our church right now—  
even though that *is* what I'm asking our members to do.  
So, for visitors, please relax  
and enjoy this look at our church finances.  
Money is always interesting, I think,  
and this is going to help you get to know us better!

This is actually one of my favorite Sundays of the church year.  
I think Canvass Sunday is great,  
not only because I love skits (*thank you, Harry!*),  
not only because I think our budget process is fascinating  
and important.  
On that note, I'd like to recognize the wonderful work  
of our Budget & Finance Committee,  
which has done a truly excellent job putting our budget together  
and juggling our needs and our resources.  
They have given us a wonderful gift.

We all will get a chance to see our draft budget  
at our informational meeting after church on June 1.  
I hope to see you all there. And today:

Colleen Cook, Bev Blum, Susan Johnsen,  
Dorothy Sandelius, David Turner—  
members of the Budget & Finance Committee—  
if you are here, could you please rise so that we can honor you?

*(Applause)*

I'll give us all a chance  
to applaud our Canvass Committee too, a little later on!

I think Canvass Sunday is great  
not only because it's a chance to recognize our wonderful volunteers,  
but because this is a chance to do something really big  
and feel magnificent about it.

If you are anything like me, pledging to our church  
is far and away the biggest charitable gift you're going to make all year.  
You have a chance to do something really big with your money—  
to blow it all in one place, as it were,  
in service of the values and ideals that I know you care about  
so very much.

And you get to see the tangible results  
in the life of this community every single week.  
You don't have to wait around  
wondering if your gift *really* made a difference  
because it's so obvious that it *does* make a difference.

The money you give is what pays the salaries of our phenomenal staff.  
Our religious education programs for children and for adults,  
our music program,  
our publications, our welcoming of visitors,  
the support we offer to all the volunteer leaders of our church,  
and me up here talking to you—  
all these things are possible because of the talent and vision  
of our hard-working staff,  
and you are the ones who make their presence here possible,  
with your generosity.

I am asking you to pledge today as generously as you possibly can,

as a tangible, concrete affirmation of their work.

The money you give is what feeds our mission into the community and preserves our beautiful buildings into the future. You are the ones who have given thousands of dollars through our Social Justice Collections, just in this year alone, to organizations in our community that are working to realize our ideals of justice and peace, equality and sustainability. Our church has long been proud of its outspoken community leadership, and *your* commitment is what carries that heritage forward today. I am asking you to pledge today as generously as you possibly can, in support of the ongoing strength of the church as a community presence.

You are the ones who committed to the stunning refurbishment of our Religious Education Cottage this year. The cottage is so beautiful and functional for our children now, and we never could have done it without your gifts. For all this I say *thank you*, and *congratulations!* You deserve to be very proud, very proud indeed!

Now I invite you come along with me in imagining our future, a future built on all the strengths of our past and all the gifts that are blossoming today. Imagine a church, if you will—imagine *this* church—a church where members are supported, encouraged, and *challenged* to deepen their spiritual and ethical lives. Imagine a church whose members know our history and celebrate our liberal religious heritage. They engage in spiritual practice to deepen their connection with the source of all that exists, which some call the universe, others call God, and many others decline to name at all.

The members of this church are sustained by their faith,  
and they sustain one another through their joys and griefs.  
They constantly invite and welcome newcomers  
because they believe in the transforming, salvific power of our faith.  
Imagine this.

Imagine a church whose members are not content  
to tend only to their own individual needs,  
but reach out into the community and the world  
to share their energy and their love.  
Imagine a church that clearly proclaims its values to the world—  
a church that preaches and teaches a sustainable way of life,  
a church that preaches and teaches  
that we are a part of the interdependent web of all life—  
a church that affirms the dignity and worth of all people,  
and indeed all beings—  
a church that not only preaches and teaches these values  
but lives them out in loving and active service to our world—  
a church where this responsibility is joyfully claimed by *all* its members.

This is what I see our church becoming.  
This is our mission:  
to transform ourselves and the world—  
to commit our whole being  
to the deepest, highest, most life-giving values we have found,  
to proclaim these values to the world  
that they might flourish, that they might make real in our world  
a love that unites rather than divides us...  
a justice that rolls down like mighty waters...  
and an ever-renewing hope for the future of this earth, our only home.  
Is this not a solemn and a joyful task?  
Is this not a purpose worthy of our utmost loyalty and love?

This is why *I* give to our church—  
because I believe in our future—

a future grounded in our past but not limited by it—  
and this is why I ask *you* to give today.

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Let me switch gears for a moment and talk in very practical terms  
about how we fund our church.

Last year our total budgeted expenses were just about \$220,000.00.  
This year they're going to be about 10% higher  
so that we can raise the salaries of our staff  
and attend to a few urgent building repairs.

On the income side, we receive about \$25,000.00  
in rental property income each year,  
thanks to the visionary folks who led our church years ago  
to buy two neighboring properties,  
This has given us room to expand as we grow  
and supports us with that rental income in the meantime.

We receive another \$7000 or so from renting our church buildings  
to various community groups, musicians, and suchlike.  
Our UU Alliance and our bookstore contribute another \$3000 or so.  
You contribute over \$4000 a year  
to our monthly Social Justice Collections,  
and another \$4000 or so to our regular Sunday collections  
supporting the church.  
So all those different pieces give us about \$45,000 in income.  
This year we hope to add a couple of fun fundraisers  
to cover the increases in our budget.

That all leaves us with about \$175,000 to raise.  
Almost all of that sum comes from your pledging,  
which is of course our topic today!  
Now, we have also been blessed over the past few years

with a safety net of sorts.

About 25 years ago, one of our congregants died and left almost her entire estate to the church.

Her name was Bernice Spaeth, and the fund this extremely generous lady set up for the church bears her name today.

Her wish was that the fund be used partly for the support of the church, but mostly to fund social action or service projects in the community. For some 15 years our church was well-known in Stockton as a community grant-maker.

But about 10 years ago, circumstances led us to start using more of Mrs. Spaeth's fund to support the operating budget of the church. Our longtime minister Bob Green was also a lawyer and could afford to take a salary that was well below the norm. So after Bob retired, the church committed to increasing the salary of its ministers—for which I and my predecessors thank you!—and also to paying all of our staff better, in line with the fair compensation guidelines published by our national office. We've also asked most of our staff to work more hours. So, over the course of 10 years or so, our annual operating budget has increased by about \$60,000 in today's dollars.

That's a lot of money, and you have been responding so generously. Again in today's dollars, last year we pledged about \$35,000 more than 10 years ago. That is wonderful. Still, that leaves a good amount of money to raise. We've been managing by spending down the Spaeth Fund

to make up the difference in our budgets.

I'm glad our church has made fair compensation for our staff such a strong priority.

But we also know that Mrs. Spaeth's money will not last forever at the rate we are spending it.

Right now the Spaeth Fund has about \$220,000 in it, and if we continue to spend it down at our present rate it will be gone in about 10 years.

None of us wants that, I know.

It would be amazing to be able to go back to using that money to live out our social mission.

And I think we can do it!

Even with the budget increases this year, the way things are looking right now, we could completely balance our budget and restore the Spaeth Fund to its intended purpose with only \$40,000 in increased pledging.

I say "only" because it might sound like a lot, but it's really not that much

when you realize with the number of pledging units we have—that's individuals or couples who pledge together—it works out to only \$30 per month, per individual or family.

So here is a challenge for you—

this is the first of two challenges I'm going to put to you:

Take a moment to think about your personal income and expenses.

If you are struggling to stay in your home and put food on the table, this challenge is not for you.

Give something if you can,

but please do what you need to take care of yourself and your family, and please let us know if you need help.

We are here to support one another.

But if you have enough money to cover your basic living expenses—

your rent or mortgage, groceries, gas, clothes—

I challenge you to increase your pledge

by at least \$30 a month this year.

Let's do this—

let's empower our church to be fully and generously funded;

let's live out our mission to be a powerful voice for justice in this community and beyond.

That will be amazing.

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Now, you may also be wondering what I'm pledging this year.

I made a promise to this congregation when I arrived

that I would consistently give 5% of my salary back to the church.

That's what I will be giving next year toward our operating budget—

5% of whatever I earn—just keep it clean and simple.

I'm also putting some extra money aside

to give toward the capital improvement projects

that will be coming down the road.

Some of you are already doing just the same or more,

and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

You are our leaders, you know who you are,

and this entire church is profoundly grateful

for your generosity and your vision,

even if they don't know your names.

And here is my second challenge:

If you hear your heart whispering to you,

“I could do that, I *could* give more,”

but for whatever reason something has held you back—

will you listen to that whisper?

Will you allow it to become a voice of strength and power

by committing to pledge 3% or 4% or 5% of your income,

or even more if you are among the marvelously lucky people

who can afford to do that?

Will we allow ourselves  
to give more than we imagine is possible?

I'd like to invite you into a moment of silent meditation.  
Please ask yourself if you can give more than you planned  
when you walked in this door—  
in service to a church and a faith  
which connect us to something so much larger than ourselves—  
which will endure long after we are gone—  
a church and a faith  
which strive to bring peace, compassion, and justice to our world.

Let us be in silence together.

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May it be abundantly so.  
Amen.