

SERMON (April 14th, 2024 - We Show Up)

Here we are, online for worship this week, as the remarkable transformation of our church continues with Fellowship Hall floors being refurbished and refinished, ensuring decades more worth of services, meetings, dances, and classes can commence.

Here we are, online for worship this week, in the midst of our combined Pledge and Capital Campaign fundraising drive.

And this is always one of those strange times in the church year, when we end up diving into one of those topics that Unitarian Universalists seem to have such an aversion to... MONEY.

And not just money... but GIVING.

The sharing of financial resources that keeps congregations going.

By now though, you guys know that I'm a pretty direct person. My ministerial style is not the most subtle... I like to steer right into the storm, take topics head on, I'm a go deep or go home guy.

So lets go deep into pledging. Into generosity. Into the whats and whys of how money is raised and spent at UU Marin and what the next couple years ahead have in store for us.

Now you've heard me say before that I'm a religious humanist... but it's important to know that I'm also a religious socialist. Which means that I believe, in my interpretation of ancient scriptures and the myriad forms of global spiritual belief systems... that it is our sacred duty, as religious seekers, as human beings with creative, animated and animating souls, to be generous and giving to one another on this earthly plane... to transform this world and our communities into a more materially just and hospitable place for our siblings in the here and now.

And I believe that the more we share and give of ourselves and our talents and our resources... we get back innumerable rewards of the spirit. Our tangible materials are given... and what we receive is a refreshed, abundant spirit that has the capacity to change lives and communities, to change the world.

Proverbs 11:24-25 says... ***One person gives freely yet gains even more. Another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper, whoever refreshes will be refreshed.***

So how will our community be refreshed?

First, let's talk about the Our Community, Our Turn Capital Campaign... begun in the Summer of 2022... with a focus on Renewal, Accessibility, and Enhancement, over the last two years this congregation has raised roughly \$2 million dollars to engage in an ambitious array of projects that will modernize, stabilize, and fundamentally transform our congregational home.

I have to admit, sometimes I feel a little late to the party, as I was called and began this ministry with UU Marin after the incredibly dedicated Capital Campaign Team and my predecessor, Rev. Marcus, had already raised a remarkable amount of the funds.

And yet, I am so unbelievably grateful that I get to be here for the transformation... we have a solar array atop the congregation that provides renewable, clean energy, we have a new, well functioning sewer line that will last us another 75 years, we have gorgeous wood floors that look as good as new, and we're about to embark upon a transformation of our courtyard and interior that will make this one of the most beautiful Unitarian Universalist churches in the country.

It's important to note that this project is not just some project of vanity or aesthetic ambition... the work being done in this Capital Campaign project is VITAL to our ability to continue on for generations.

When UU Marin was founded and eventually picked this hillside as its home... much of the work of building and establishing this physical congregational home was done by the congregants themselves. The design of the building reflected at the time, modern, but now timeless trends in architecture and style.

And generations of congregants have made their mark, contributed to our infrastructure in innumerable and immeasurable ways.

Our beloved Koi Pond is dedicated in the name of congregant Kathleen Rice.

Our walking paths are dedicated in the names of the congregation's founding couple Gordon and Adina Robinson.

And congregant Art Wesley.

Our beautiful mulberry trees were a gift from and planted by, congregant Ken McKinnon.

Our magnificent front doors with custom glasswork were a gift from and dedicated to, congregants Dr. John and Marguerite Siemens.

And the balcony that I go out and stand on, staring out over one of the most amazing views in Marin County, was refurbished by our own beloved Anne Baele, and is dedicated to her incredible husband, the late great John Kouns.

These are just a few names, a handful of the hundreds and hundreds of congregants, who over the 75 years that UU Marin has been in existence gave of themselves, no less than their money, to renew, enhance, and make more accessible the beautiful space this spiritual community calls home.

But in order for us to continue to live in beloved community and share this sacred space for generations to come... we have to invest our time, treasure, and talent.

The transformation of our courtyard is vital to us remaining and insurable, safe, and accessible institution.

The expansion of our hallways is crucial to us being able to truly live into our shared spiritual values of multigenerational, inclusive, and accessible community.

Right now, when I wait in the courtyard after service to speak with you all, I often tense up in fear that one misstep on an uneven brick could turn a gorgeous Sunday afternoon into a medical emergency.

And I can't tell you how many times I've feared that one of my kids, running down the narrow hallways as kids are apt to sometimes do, might accidentally bump into an older beloved congregant.

The spiritual values of our desire to live in multi-cultural, pluralistic, multi-generational community... call us into very real,

very tangible, very material, and very expensive practical decisions.

Just like we know thoughts and prayers alone can't change domestic policy in America, our spiritual convictions alone cannot be made manifest without hard work and transformative financial contributions.

Right now the overall Capital Campaign project will cost about \$2.6 million dollars. We've raised about \$2 million.

So, I'm a just be straight up with you... we are currently facing a roughly \$600,000 shortfall that we HAVE to make up one way or another. And we have to do it soon.

Shovels are in the dirt on July 1st and we're looking at months of construction ahead. We've received nearly 20% of pledges for this next church year already... but so far, only 1 had additional contribution to the capital campaign

It's important to know that in December of this last year, Capital campaign leaders and members of the Board of trustees raised their own contributions to the Capital Campaign by 10% or more.

Now I haven't spoken that much about the Capital Campaign because I truly believe it's ideas, it's implementation, it's results have to come from the hearts and through the will of the congregation itself. I'm only just getting to know this spiritual home and the impact of this project will far outlive and outlast me... but I will say this...

Our ability to grow as a congregation... to host incredible events, to expand our potential as a cornerstone of Marin County's spiritual, artistic, and intellectual culture. Our ability to bestow this congregation to successive generations... depends upon this project coming to full and transformative fruition.

And in order for this shared ministry you and I have embarked upon to grow into the exciting array of possibilities and priorities that I know we all want it to... this Capital Campaign project needs to succeed, and we need to see it through to completion.

I'm asking everyone in the congregation, whatever amount you can... whether it's \$100 or \$10,000... whether you've already made a Capital Campaign contribution or if you've held off or weren't interested in it before...

Please... as your minister, as the person called to steward and shepherd this congregation in this time and in this era... I am asking you to make a contribution to this project. Let's show up for not just one another... but for all those that came before us... let's show up for all the generations of UU Marin congregants yet to come.

Now... the other half of this dual fundraising drive... is Pledging!

And some people might be saying...well I donate every Sunday via the QR code on the order of service. I give to the virtual basket. Isn't that pledging?

Some people might be saying, well why don't we just use our pledge money to finish the capital campaign?

And I want to clarify some of this, because it is confusing.

I didn't grow up a church person. I only came to Unitarian Universalism in my 30's and UU congregations don't actually have the same spiritually ingrained culture of tithing that so many other congregations do.

Learning the ins and outs of church finances and fundraising is not an intuitive or easy thing. But we can learn it together...

So... in the spring of every church year we prepare a draft budget for the next church year. This budget will ultimately be voted on and approved by you the voting members of UU Marin.

But... you also have the incredible power of helping to influence the budget via your pledge. We build the budget based upon the known pledges that come in every year in our fundraising drives just like this one.

And a pledge isn't a check... a pledge isn't the money itself... a pledge is a promise. It's a commitment. It's you the member saying... over the next year, me and mine, our family can pledge to give UU Marin this amount of money.

How you ultimately fulfill or pay your pledge is up to you. Some folks want to get it out of the way and write one large check in the beginning of the church year. Other folks space it out quarterly. Some people sign up for monthly payments of their pledge to be auto drafted from their bank accounts. Sort of like a Spiritual Subscription service, your promise to UU Marin would come out just like your Netflix or Spotify or Hello Fresh payments do.

It's important to remember... UU Marin covenants with you to be there through thick and thin. To show up in the best and the worst of times. So finances should never be a barrier to your full membership at UU Marin. If you hit hard times and need to modify your pledge or if you simply can't pledge in a particular fiscal year... that's not a problem. No shame in your game, my friends.

I've pinched pennies most of my life and now I rely upon my wife's budgeting prowess to make miracles happen. It's ok if you can't give that much or at all monetarily. We only ask that you communicate with us about it. If we know... then we can plan.

And... if you ever need help... the church can show up for you in a variety of ways.

That's the kind of alternative economic system that we get to create up here. It's not a rat race. It's not a vice. No one gets squeezed up here on the hill.

We're in this together. Sharing, pooling, acting collectively.

Sometimes it may feel like our financial priorities are at odds... For instance... It is a major priority of this congregation as reflected in the Family Ministries Retreat, the Congregational Start Up, and the Leadership Council, that we have a vibrant, multi-generational, pluralistic, and fun Lifespan Religious Exploration and Spiritual Development program.

Rev. Lynne, who has been our Family Ministries Director and overseen the religious development of our children and youth is retiring at the end of this church year.

Her service to us has gone far beyond Sunday mornings... Rev. Lynne and her wife Nancy raised their boys in this congregation, and now she's given us years of incredible work fostering our children's inquisitive spirits.

There is no way we'll ever be able to replace Rev. Lynne Scarpa.

Her legacy of service will be with us for years to come.

But we do need to hire a new director to expand and build off of the incredible growth that Lynne provided for us.

The landscape out there for RE's is pretty tough.

Do you remember about a year ago when Rev. Marcus explained that for the first time ever, many churches were going without not just Settled Ministers but Interim Ministers too?

Well the situation with Religious Education is even more complicated. Especially in the Bay Area with cost of living as high as it is.

Currently two or three other Bay Area UU congregations are also looking for Director's of their Religious Education programs some with larger some with smaller compensation packages than we are budgeting for.

But all of that is background noise when we think not about the money we'll spend but what we want to actually spend it on.

When we're talking about showing up for one another... it means to me that we're investing in a community that will see our children through some of the most complicated and alarming times in American history... that it will teach them the value of generosity, kindness, courage, resilience, truth, justice, hard work, tough questions, compassionate love, and multi-generational legacy.

Our kids will get to grow up with a dozen different sets of grandparents. Our kids will get to grow up in touch with a religious heritage that blends Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Humanist, Indigenous, and Hindu theological understandings into something that will endure for them through thick and thin.

And our kids will grow up knowing that from the moment they came into this world until they were launched off to take wing on their own epic journeys... that they have a community in their corner rooting for them, supporting them, helping them, never judging them, but always wishing for them love and peace and growth.

You can't put a price tag on that. That kind of community is invaluable.

When I think about our Pledge drive, what the money in our general operating fund will go to supporting... I have to remember and realize that a beautiful courtyard and expansive hallways are only as lovely as the life that will be lived in them.

So we must support both the transformation of our physical infrastructure but also the transformation of our spirits and our souls by our support of UU Marin's holistic ministry.

One of the 20th centuries most influential Unitarian Universalist ministers was the Rev. Dr. John Wolf. He ministered to All Souls Tulsa, the church formational to my own ministry journey, for an astounding 35 years. And he grew All Souls Tulsa into the largest, most influential UU church not just in the United States, but in the WORLD. All Souls Tulsa had it's own television show in the 80's and 90's. Now, under the 20 year ministry of Rev. Marlin Lavanhard, All Souls has an online membership program with international reach.

And the seeds for that kind of reach were planted as far back as 1960, under Rev. Dr. Wolf's ministry.

And there are a million great quotes or stories about John Wolf... he was quite a personality... but there are two that I want to tell you about now...

First, John Wolf made the bold, simple, and profound statement that, "There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church... to support it!"

And that statement is 100% true. Why else would we come together up here, week after week, if it wasn't to support a different way of being, a value set that we all aspire and work towards, a life of meaning and purpose and love and compassion lived together come what may.

"There is only one reason for joining a Unitarian Universalist church... to support it!"

And know that by your support of us... we will support you.

Now... my next John Wolf story, was told to me by someone who visited All Souls after a transformational Capital Campaign that was conducted in the late 1980's. The nearly 70 year old church was remodeled and expanded, it was a remarkable transformation. And a minister colleague of mine was walking the new hallways and saw his old friend, Rev. Dr. Wolf... and said,

“John, this is just beautiful. You must be so proud. What a gorgeous church.”

And without skipping a beat, Wolf said, “Isn't it amazing what God can do if you give him a little money?”

We're clear eyed, my friends. We know what hard work it takes, what sacrifice it takes to make big things happen.

We're also full hearted... we know why we work hard and sacrifice and do big things.

Because it's worth it to show up for one another. To show up to fulfill our long legacy. To show up to leave one for the children that will inherit this church from us.

We show up, UU Marin. And I love you so much for it.

Amen & Blessed Be.