

## Aim High

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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Three scenes in the life of our congregation.  
I've changed some of the details to protect people's identities,  
but the stories are true.  
All three have happened, here, within the last few weeks.

Scene one: The phone rings.  
It's a young woman calling to ask for help.  
She's gay, and her neighbors know it,  
and they've been hassling her unmercifully,  
calling out insults as she walks down the street,  
even vandalizing her car.  
She dares to reach out to our church  
because she's seen our rainbow flag flying  
and thinks maybe, just maybe,  
this could be a safe place for her just to be herself.

Scene two: A longtime member is ill and needs help  
taking care of things at home.  
A candle is lit during Joys and Concerns and the request made.  
Literally within hours, church members have stepped up  
to help with what's needed,  
bringing comfort and peace of mind to someone who sorely needs it.

Scene three: Someone comes to a Sunday service for the first time.  
Afterwards, they talk with people here about their spiritual life.  
They sense they need something more  
than they've found on their own.  
They think this might be a church where they can grow and learn.  
On their way out the door,

they slip a check for several hundred dollars  
in the collection plate. “This is for the church,” they say.  
This place mattered to them.

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Friends, it matters that this congregation is here.  
It matters that we are here,  
standing up for equality and liberation  
in a community where it is not yet safe for everyone  
to simply be who they are;  
It matters that we proclaim the way of free religion,  
freedom of belief and joyful community.  
It matters that we are here,  
caring for one another, for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
in life and in death.  
It matters a lot.

You know this.  
You all know this.  
Yet, lately, we have felt fearful about our future.  
On this Pledge Sunday I want to name out loud  
the fears I know we carry in our hearts.  
There has been a lot of anxiety in the air  
about our church’s future.  
Many folks are concerned, and very reasonably so,  
about whether the congregation’s cash flow  
can support the staff you want to have.  
People disagree over how much  
we should be using our capital reserves to get through this recession.  
Money is one of the most common triggers for anxiety  
in congregations, and ours is no exception.

I can’t make the anxiety go away,

but what I can do is give you *information*.  
Your pledge drive committee is asking you to pledge  
4 to 6% of your income to your church.

Some of us are already pledging at this level  
and have been doing so for years.  
Our congregation has a tradition of keeping pledges anonymous,  
so we can't honor you publicly by name, but you know who you are  
and I hope you know how very much your generosity is appreciated.  
We celebrate you and thank you!

Now, some of us truly cannot afford to pledge that much,  
or maybe at all.  
If you are struggling to cover your and your family's basic needs,  
this congregation wants to be there for you.  
We do not expect a pledge from anyone who is struggling financially.  
In fact, we urge you to come to the church for help if you need it.  
We have some money set aside to help out our members  
when they're in need—not a lot, but some.  
Please don't hesitate to ask.  
We want to help.

And if you are a visitor today,  
obviously we don't expect you to pledge either.

This is something we ask of people who have made a commitment  
to the congregation, through formal membership  
or simply through ties of love and respect.  
If this is who you are, I want to address you directly for a moment.

If you and enough others commit to pledging in that 4 to 6% range,  
which your pledge drive committee is asking of you,  
let me tell you what will happen.  
This congregation will have ample money to carry out its mission  
and expand it in ways we have not yet even dreamed of.

You will not have to worry about whether this church can truly afford to hire a religious educator for our children, and a music director to enrich our worship life. You will not have to worry about whether you can continue to afford full-time professional ministry. You will not have to worry about spending down the church's capital reserves, because there won't be any need to do that.

If you answer the pledge committee's call to pledge 4 to 6% of your income, and enough others join you, you *will* have to discern what the congregation should do with the money left over after we pay all our bills. Should we expand our social justice ministries? Should we build up our endowment fund to ensure the health of the congregation in years to come? How do *you* see this congregation living out its mission to transform lives by nurturing spiritual and ethical growth, welcoming and including all people, and speaking out as a voice of conscience in the greater community? These are the questions you will be challenged to respond to.

Now, I know some of you may be saying to yourselves, who is she kidding? You might be thinking, there's no way that could happen, especially not in this economy. We know that many of our members continue to suffer economically during this recession. There is not a single person in this room who doesn't understand that. We all long and hope for better days in the future. But meanwhile what your pledge drive committee is asking you to do is not to give more than you have, but simply to give from what you do have.

It's not about this or that dollar amount.  
What they ask is that you give a percentage of what you have,  
which is already being modeled by many of our leaders.

We often wonder why conservative churches  
are so powerful and influential in our culture today.  
One reason is, their members are far more generous  
to their congregations than Unitarian Universalists have been.  
They are more deeply committed  
to the financial support of their congregations,  
and it shows in their effectiveness on the national stage.  
They are changing the world, though not as we would.

It's often said that Unitarian Universalists  
tend to give less to their congregations  
as a percentage of their income  
than members of most other religious communities.  
I wonder sometimes whether this is because we fear our own power.  
In today's reading, Marianne Williamson tells us  
what we fear most deeply is not our weakness, but our power.<sup>1</sup>  
We fear the power that we could generate  
if enough of us fully committed to our congregations  
as agents of transformation and radical life.  
If enough of us in this congregation  
committed to giving at a 5% level, or even 4% or 3%,  
we would have so much money we wouldn't know what to do with it.  
We literally would not know how to spend it.  
And we would have to have a whole new conversation:  
how will we use our abundant resources  
to make a difference in this world?  
How will we be about the work of changing lives,  
which is always and ever the true work of the church?

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Williamson, *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 190–191.

This could be our reality—  
not in 5 years, or ten years, but right now.  
The choice is yours.  
For many of us, pledging at this level may mean  
having to forgo some material things we would have enjoyed.  
I know that's true for me.  
But to me it's worth it  
because I believe so strongly in our mission.  
I believe our community needs this congregation  
where people of every race and class  
and age and sexual orientation  
can come together in freedom,  
where people care for one another in need,  
where the flame of liberal religion burns bright  
in its commitment to freedom of conscience  
and respect for all people.

We need this place.  
And so do all the people who have yet to walk through our doors—  
the people who need a religion like this one,  
a church like this one—  
people who long to be healed and make a difference in their world.  
For ourselves, for all those yet to come, and for our world,  
may we be bold and strong together.

So may it be.  
Amen.