



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Generosity Path

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It's the most wonderful time of the year in church. Yes, I know, Christmas is over. And yes, I'm aware Easter is early this year but not this early. It's pledge drive season, the time of year when we reflect on our giving to the church and pledge again for the year to come. I'm grateful to our two wonderful co-chairs Andy Eaton and Bob Gotham for their steadfast work to get our 2017 campaign off to such a strong start.

If this were public radio's most wonderful season, you might turn down the dial for a week or two until the regularly scheduled programming resumed. Here in church, I invite you not to tune out but to lean in to this as an invitation to reflect and to grow.

In his book *Preaching and Stewardship: Proclaiming God's Invitation to Grow*, Lutheran bishop Craig Satterlee writes that the church's practice of stewardship has both a pragmatic and a theological component—a financial necessity and a spiritual good. He writes: "God does not give us a single, eternal, divinely authorized practice of giving money to the church." Rather, our systems of stewardship and budgeting have not been handed down from on high, but been established over time as practical ways to build and sustain our religious institutions.

Vanderbilt Divinity School Professor of Church history James Hudnut-Beumler studied patterns of giving in Protestant churches over the past 250 years. He proposes that stewardship is a specific to time, place, and history.

The approaches to stewardship we understand as common practice have evolved with our uniquely American religious heritage. According to Hudnut-Beumler, the major shift in giving practices in American religious life was the church's "relocation from a public good to a private, voluntarily supported good." In their earliest times, the 17th and 18th centuries, our New England congregational churches were understood as belonging to the community and funded as such by a combination of local tax dollars, pew rentals and private donations.

As American religious life became more decidedly democratic, dedicated to the separation of church and state and the proliferation of religious freedom, churches needed more to institutionalize private fundraising efforts. Thus, American Protestant congregations, including our Unitarian and Universalist congregations, began their current stewardship practices in earnest in the late 1800s through the end of World War 1.

Underlying the development of stewardship practices in church was a fundamental tension in American religious life: the need for a pragmatic approach to raising material funds that worked and a theological approach that would appeal to the spiritual needs of the churchgoer. While their earliest efforts were grounded in the similar financial needs—the minister, staff and facilities, the interest in developing a mission beyond the church walls came later.

It was not until after the Great Awakenings that the progressive optimism of the Social Gospel movement produced an interest in mission and offering humanitarian aid in areas impacted by war and political strife. It was when the sense of mission became attached to stewardship practices that stewardship really “preached” to church goers hearts. Then and now, members of churches want to know that their faith is making a difference, not only in their lives, but in lives of others around the world.

As American religious history has evolved, congregations are still perfecting the craft of stewardship. Noting periods of lack and periods of abundance, economic down turns and booms, Hudnut-Beumler sees this unfolding history of stewardship as a process of trial and error, one which has “searched for rather than grown from the church’s theology.” With no one magic bullet which is guaranteed to unlock the dollars, preachers and church goers alike search for the right message and method to do the very real and necessary work of sustaining church.

How churches share this message of stewardship varies widely from liberal to conservative, from “giving out of gratitude for blessings received, to giving to receive blessings, to giving so not as to anger God by violating a divine command.” Methods, on the other hand, remain standard. As it turns out, our pledge cards and face to face efforts are not unique—we share these methods with our farthest apart religious neighbors. Here at Neighborhood, we have formed a stewardship team this year to review best practices and plan for our pledge drive and a year-round approach to church stewardship. What we learned was consistent with the history: stewardship, like our faith, is in no way one size fits all.

We have our needs to support the institution of the church not unlike any other congregation at any other time in history. And yet, what the church is in the business of is not maintaining a building or grounds, as beautiful as our buildings and grounds are. The business of our church is transforming lives, and yet the way we do that is through our facilities, our personnel and our programs. Liberal and conservative churches alike get into trouble when we forget this. Church stewardship expert J. Clif Christopher puts it this way:

The biggest problem I still see in our churches is that we talk way too much about the need for money and not enough about the ministry being done. We talk about maintaining rather than transforming. We do not help our people to see how they can invest in changing lives but rather how they are supporting an institution. Giving is not something we do for the church. It is what we do for ourselves as a response for all we have been given in this life.

As we begin in earnest our first pledge drive together, it is important to explore these different approaches to stewardship knowing that stewardship, is not one size fits all. But is also essential that we create an understanding of stewardship that suits this particular time and place in our ministry, a time of great promise and potential. Unlike a creed-driven community, we are a values driven community that is shaped by our membership.

While we celebrate freedom in every aspect of our religious life, church is fundamentally tethered to a sense of commitment and shared investment. Our common values, rather than our common theology, unite us, as does our commitment to the church as an instrument for good, a way to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice. We are a congregation who covenants not that we all believe the same things about God and religion, but to care for our congregation and to be on a path together so we create a solid foundation for our future, a future we are creating together. The questions our board of trustees selected to guide the vision process are appropriate for us today:

How do our spiritual journeys bring us together as a congregation and where does our path lead us next?

Mark Ewert is a Unitarian Universalist whose passion is church stewardship. He travels around the country to congregations helping them connect to their deepest understandings of why we give. Bless him! His latest book is called *The Generosity Path: Finding the Richness in Giving*. His starting point for stewardship is to remind our congregations of our inherent generosity and goodness, and how we might wish to grow this part of ourselves. The path of growing in generosity is to start where we are, becoming aware of our habits of giving and our history to build on our strengths.

As we look at our American religious history, one of searching for the theology to meet the practical financial needs of our churches, we need to be clear about our own theological habits and how they continue to serve us now. For example, take a look at what is engraved on our offering plates. "Freely you have received, freely give." Do we still believe this? And what does it mean for our giving? What if in our search, we might start to shift our paradigm—freely give, freely ye receive? What if freely giving is the way we receive spiritually, rather than giving as a measure of what we have received from church?

That is certainly the way that Buddhists understand generosity. Going back to our reading this morning, let's recall the words of Sharon Salzberg, American Buddhist teacher:

Generosity is the inception of the path. The Buddha himself always started with new practitioners by teaching them *dana*, the practice of generosity. The path begins here, and the Buddha began his teachings here, because when we practice generosity, we begin to know a very beautiful quality of joy, a sheer, unhindered delight flowing freely.

I love Sharon Salzberg's story about her personal resolve to give. If one thought comes up in her mind to give something away, she does it, even if the next fifty thoughts are: "Oh no, I can't do that. I might need it!" What a simple but profound challenge to follow your intuition to give.

I wonder if you have had those urges to give, and if you allow yourself to follow that movement of your heart. In New York City, I often had these impulses to give and many chances to give on a daily basis. If you've experienced New York City, you know there is a

strong culture of people asking for money on the subway. In one day, you can be asked for money dozens of times. With so much need, giving fatigue is common, even amongst people who considered themselves generous. I would carry change and dollar bills to give to people, but would quickly find myself running out before I could make it through my morning commute. In the wintertime, a homeless woman named Peaches would sleep on the steps of All Souls. I would pass her every day to find her mostly asleep, her tiny frame swimming in a giant down coat.

One frigid morning, I had the impulse to give a small comfort to her so I went to the coffee shop across the street to buy her a coffee and a cookie. I approached her on the steps with my hands outstretched offering it to her. I felt my heart opening as I spoke to her offering her the gift. She quickly told me in a firm but kind voice thank you very much but she had strict dietary rules and did not accept gifts of food.

She then went on to tell me her story of her life, her political persecution and immigration from Cuba. She told me the story of how she made the very deliberate decision to sleep on the church's steps, an open and accepting church she believed in politically and religiously. It was the longest conversation we would ever have. That day the gift was not in what was given, but the act of giving that created an opening for connection where there wasn't before.

The Buddhists talk about the generous heart as the foundation of the spiritual life. There too is a vulnerability. There may be a fear in giving that you if you stretch you will not have enough to provide for yourself or for those you care about. You may, as I did that wintry day, feel like your gift is inadequate or may be rejected. These fears are real, especially for many of us raised in households where teachings on scarcity rather than abundance were the norm. I know that is true for me.

While I grew up middle class and comfortable with more than my needs provided for, money was a profoundly uncomfortable topic. I often received messages from my family that there was not enough for us to go around. I did not learn about charitable giving from my family. I did learn to go to church, and there I was taught the joy that comes from giving to others. Church has been the foundation of my own generosity path.

Giving is the practice that helps us cultivate the virtue of generosity. It is not that some people are more generous than others because their resources are greater. In fact, less affluent congregations are often the ones who have the highest financial commitment to their churches from their members. Giving is about leaning into faith, in spite of the fear of not having enough. Once you let go and give, you surrender yourself to a sense that something larger holds you: community, God, the universe. You commit yourself to the belief that there will be enough, in fact, more than enough, to go around, for ourselves and for others. Protestant minister Henri Nouwen echoes this sentiment in his words: "Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love." As we walk this generosity path together into our bright future, may it be so, and Amen.

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