

**WE HAVE A DREAM:
On Growing and Sustaining our Fellowship
January 14, 2007**

**Presented by Patricia Borneman, Treasurer
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A story for all ages:

A Jewish Rabbi, a Catholic priest and a UU minister were discussing how they divide the collection plate between church use and God. The Rabbi said that he draws a circle in the middle of the room, stands in the middle of it, and throws the money up into the air. Whatever falls outside the circle goes to the Lord, and what falls inside goes to the church. The priest said that he does something similar. However, he draws a line. When he throws up the money whatever falls in front of him is for the church, whatever is behind him goes to God. The UU minister said that she also used a similar method for dividing up the collection plate. She throws up the money and she figures whatever God wants, God will grab. (*Ann Fuller, UU Church of Brevard, W. Melbourne, FL*)

SERMON

Tomorrow, January 15th, is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and congregations all over the country are sermonizing about the great spiritual and civil rights leader. We will do so, but not until next Sunday, when Jim Clarke and Jennifer Forker will lead the service and focus on the life and legacy of Dr. King. But it feels right, since I'm talking today about growing and sustaining our fellowship, that we dream a little bit about the potential that our little congregation has to grow and flourish. And so, I get to say, "We have a Dream" and thus evoke some of Dr. King's spirit today.

I must admit, though, since I am your treasurer and the keeper of many practical matters pertaining to our church, that I also need to say something about our annual pledge drive. To prepare, I rummaged through our small library and found two books that provided some background and some good thoughts on growth. I hope you find that this sermon resonates with our UU principles and is spiritually uplifting as well as philanthropically inspiring.

But first, a little Helena UU history. The Big Sky UU Fellowship has been around for decades and several of our members are its most loyal and stalwart congregants. Our roots are in the First Helena Unitarian Society founded in 1901. One of our most favorite tidbits of trivia, for those of you who don't know, is that Helena's Grandstreet Theatre was first built to be a Unitarian Church. Reclaiming and restoring that building to its original purpose is something we dream about quite often. But instead of being in our rightful home, we've bounced around from place to place. Our numbers have gone up and down. But despite our nomadic existence, our fellowship has persevered and is lately showing great promise to grow and prosper.

Last Sunday was our annual membership meeting, and we began with introductions. Several of us said how long we'd been a part of this church and many of us said we started coming about two years ago. That's about when I began to come on a regular basis. The services took place at the Waterford, a retirement home on the east side of Helena. There were many wonderful things about the Waterford. Several of the members

resided there, so it was convenient for them to attend the service. The Waterford has an elevator and the furnishings were comfortable. We could sit in a circle and it was warm and intimate, but sometimes we couldn't hear each other speak. It cost virtually nothing to meet there, but we lacked adequate space for religious education, so families weren't as likely to join us. And we were growing, little by little, and the circle started getting larger, and it was even harder to hear and to accommodate everyone, and we realized it was time to find another place to gather as a liberal religious community.

So, we find ourselves here, at the Church of Christ, Scientist, meeting in another denomination's building, to gather and worship, and learn and sing together, and it appears we are doing something right. New friends and members have found us and enthusiastically joined the fellowship. We are seeing more families with children and have made expanding children's religious education a priority this year. We have a sound system and can amplify our voices so everyone can hear and be included, and at the same time, those of us who participate in worship services are benefiting personally from the experience,

and most importantly, are finding an outlet to contribute to our congregation's spiritual journey. And we are putting our dreams into a vision that, for the first time, feels within reach.

Here is a wonderful excerpt from Tom Owen-Towle's book, *Growing a Beloved Community*.

Over the years I've asked congregants to list their highest ideals for Unitarian Universalist character development. Love is duly noted as central to our faith, but so is justice, because love turns sentimental unless grounded in fairness. Trust keeps us going in a world soaked in cynicism. And acceptance embraces friends and makes building bridges with foes possible; what's more important than that? Then there's the unsung virtue of serenity, or equanimity, that anchors us amidst life's turbulence. And courage—who would attempt the religious pilgrimage without sufficient bravery? And, of course, there are always votes for joy and forgiveness and humility as well.

But there's one virtue without which one has little or no claim to religious living, without which congregations and societies don't sustain the path toward the Beloved Community. And it's often ignored or underrated, not even appearing on congregants' lists until they are reminded of it. That virtue is generosity—openheartedness, the cardinal ability to give lavishly of yourself to others, to the world around you, to the divine communal spirit in which we live, move, and have our beings.

How are we attempting to grow and sustain Big Sky UU Fellowship? Is ours a Beloved Community and is that what we're striving for?

We've certainly started the year off with dreams and hopes for our fellowship. We have four active committees to get things moving: Worship Service, Welcoming and Membership, Religious Education, and Community Service and Social Justice. Our past board co-chairs, Joe Goldes and Cynthia Overturf, along with our musical MVP, Winston Swift, and other members have given lavishly of themselves, helping to plant the seeds of our current growth spurt. Our new co-chairs, Jim Clarke and Joyce Kronholm, along with other board and committee members are also giving time and energy, and transforming our dreams into reality. Here are some examples:

- Empowering more lay leaders to come up here, be brave, and participate!
- Hosting more visiting UU ministers and other spiritual leaders to lead services at our church;
- Attracting more families with children and youth, and begin to offer a full-fledged religious education program.

- Expanding our reach into the Helena community to support more organizations such as Helena Food Share, Habitat for Humanity, and the Friendship Center.
- Developing a small-group ministry program that sponsors social gatherings such as “Circles of Eight” dinners, knitting for charity, book and film clubs, and other opportunities for ministering to one another.
- Forming a UU choir to cultivate the musical talents of our congregation so they can help us rejoice in singing and song during worship services.

That’s the fun of hopes and dreams. They’re limitless! We can dream, and then we can bring ourselves back down to earth, and look at our resources, and plan accordingly. Some of these dreams are already being realized just by virtue of your presence here. What it will take to nurture and develop our fellowship is your continued presence, your active involvement, and your sustained and generous stewardship of our spiritual community.

Now, on to the enthralling subject of money. I quote Robert Thayer from his book, *Offerings: Remarks on Passing the Plate*:

Ours is a free church, but it is not free. The offering portion of our worship service is a reminder of what it is means to support our own religious community instead of having somebody else support it and tell us how to live and where to go if we dissent and disobey. The offering reminds us that our congregation belongs to us, to each of us, as well as to the whole of us.

If you are able and moved to do so, I encourage you to support this church in any way you feel is meaningful and feeds your soul. Unlike other denominations that require a financial contribution to join, Unitarian Universalists only require a public gesture of commitment, your signature in our membership book. But if you are able and wish to support the church community with an offering, we ask members to make a pledge of support for the year. The cost to us as a congregation per member is a minimum of \$100 per year, not counting the cost of the church, our charitable contributions, and materials for religious education. But again, there is no requirement to give money in

order to participate as a member. Come as long as you need to, and join if you wish, and give if you can. We are grateful to have you here as part of our fellowship.

Earlier, when the plate was passed around, you may have filled out a pledge card or picked one up to fill out later. If you are planning to pledge or to become a member, we need to know by February 1 so we can tell UUA how many members we have this year.

Before I lose you in these administrative details, I'll end with a short passage from *Growing a Beloved Community*:

What does it mean to assert that healthy congregations are "holy"? It means we create an environment where minds are stimulated, hearts fortified, souls plumbed, consciences goaded, bodies embraced, and spirits restored. It means that we seek to serve whole human beings, acknowledging that the hallowed is present amid the ordinary and the commonplace.

Let us create and nurture our healthy congregation, and grow together, for each other, for our children, and for our beloved and hallowed community.