

Rev Lucy Bunch
“For What It’s Worth”
Preached February 28, 2016
UU Society of Sacramento

The UU ministers have a Facebook group where various topics are discussed. Every so often the topic of clapping comes up – whether it’s OK to clap in church or not. Some ministers feel that clapping disrupts the “worshipfulness” of the occasion, while others understand that people need to clapping is a way of expressing appreciation. I am fine with however people want to express themselves, though I have to admit sometimes clapping startles me because I am not expecting to hear it in church.

The reason some ministers are conflicted about clapping is because they are concerned that people see Sunday worship as an entertainment event – an experience to be consumed – somewhat like going to the movies or to the theater. There is fear that if people bring a consumer mentality to the services and expect to be entertained, ministers will have to change the nature of worship so that production values take precedent over message. You see this now in some of the mega-churches where their services are very glitzy productions with lots of props special effects.

This concern over production values versus message is on my mind today as we launch the annual stewardship campaign. When individuals make a commitment to contribute an annual amount to support the church we call it a pledge. These pledges support about 75% of our annual church budget – the building, the staff, the programs – all of it.

This year we are going to have some folks reach out to individuals to talk about what the church means to them, and what kind of pledge they plan to make. Some people are uncomfortable talking about pledging or fund raising for the church. Talking about it can feel awkward for both the asker and the pledger. But we know that churches don’t fund themselves, and there is no mother church which gives us money. With these issues in mind I have been thinking about new funding models for our church which are consistent with the consumer culture in our country. And I have a few ideas that I want to run by you.

I propose that to simplify things we do away with pledging and charge an entrance fee on Sundays. We can calculate how much it costs the church to function, divide by 52 for a weekly cost, count how many people attend on an average Sunday – and divide the cost by that number to get the cost per person per Sunday. Voila! Simplified! I recommend that we sell tickets on-line or in advance to make it easier and faster on Sunday morning. We should sell tickets at the door as well so that newcomers are not left out. We have a credit card reader now so it should make the process painless. How simple is that? No fundraising campaigns, no asking people for pledges. Wouldn’t this simplify our fundraising process? Now if you are new to us today don’t worry, we haven’t implemented this yet so you won’t have to pay today – and I bet I can get you a discount on your first few visits.

What do you think? Are we a go? I sense that some of you may have concerns with this approach. Hmmmm, I may need to reconsider. When I think about it, it does seem kind of crass to charge people at the door. And what if they don’t think they got their money’s worth – do we give them a refund? On the other hand people may be fine with it because its just like going to the movies. But there may be some

drawbacks. For instance charging one fee to everyone assumes that each person has similar ability to pay, and we know that's not true. Upon further reflection, I can see how that approach is not consistent with our principles of justice, equity and compassion for all people.

OK here's another idea- how about a menu plan? We give people a menu of all the possible programs with which they could engage - Sunday worship, religious education, adult enrichment, social justice work etc., and an estimated cost for each of these options. Each person or family could check off which activities were of interest and then they could buy a monthly subscription to the church that would allow them to participate in these events. We could use a punch card system to help keep track of what services they have used out of their subscription. The menu approach to funding the church is a bit more complicated than the ticket idea, but people would only pay for the specific church activities that they attend or could afford. You could buy what you can afford. And it gives the consumer of religious services a better idea of what they are paying for.

PAUSE (look out expectantly)

I expect that many of you are feeling a bit uncomfortable with these approaches. These ideas are consistent with how we are used to buying products and services. Why are we uncomfortable applying them to church?

Because a religious community is not a theatre and Sunday worship is not an entertainment opportunity. What makes us uncomfortable is the idea of commodifying our relationship to church — turning our church into a list of things to be purchased and consumed - like buying a magazine subscription or a set of golf clubs or dinner at a restaurant. We are uncomfortable with charging a fee because we know that our engagement and commitment to this community does not begin and end with any one particular program or experience. We fundamentally understand that church is not a commodity. It is not something to be bought.

As consumers our relationship with the things we buy it is a one-way relationship. We buy things to serve us – feed us, clothe us, entertain us, etc. - that is their purpose. It is all about our individual wants and needs. We may feel good about a store or restaurant where we are customers, but we don't feel like we are part owners.

But in church we serve others as much as we are served ourselves. We are in community -a network of mutuality. We contribute our time talents and support to the success of this enterprise – you are sitting here today listening to the service, but tomorrow you might be serving on a committee, or helping to serve food at Loaves and fishes, or planning an event or class. We serve this community and are served by it. You can't commodify community.

We can't commodify community because what you gain can be much greater than what you give. In serving each other we are transformed. Our mission statement is to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world – which to me means transformation. Transformation is the work of the church. Transformation is not easy – it requires personal growth, joy, depth, connection, struggle, it requires promoting freedom and justice and healing human lives. It requires community. As UU's transformation is

what we do. This is the hallmark of Unitarian Universalism. Through our church communities we transform ourselves, each other, our communities and our world. You can't put a price tag on transformation and you wouldn't want to. It is the gift we give each other and ourselves. It is what we do in our religious community.

But you can make a financial commitment to your church community, one that recognizes the importance of this church in your life and expresses how much you value our shared mission. You can make an annual or monthly pledge of funds to support the budget of the church.

What does your pledge represent?

Your pledge represents a commitment to your fellow congregants – your commitment to do your part to ensure that this church remains strong so that we can come together on Sunday morning to sing, explore, learn, reflect, share our joys and sorrows; so that we can share our lives, share our dreams; so that we can challenge each other, love each other, feed and enrich our spirits.

Your pledge represents a commitment to people who haven't found us yet. I have heard from many of you that you have a yearning - a yearning for the church to be a refuge for people seeking a liberal spiritual community. I have heard you speak of wanting these newcomers to find the same loving, supporting and encouraging community that you have found here. Who knows who comes through our doors on Sunday or what they need – healing, support, inspiration? It's a messy chaotic world out there. I am grateful for the small space of peace and connection that we do create. Together we can create small miracles of transformation in people lives - for ourselves – those of us who are here now, and for people who haven't shown up yet. These transformations ripple out in ways that we can never know, to create the world we all dream of.

Your pledge represents your commitment to the future. I have heard your dreams of reaching out beyond these beautiful walls – reaching out to community, to the region. I have heard your dreams of making a difference in the world. We are working on plans for a social justice theme next year that will focus our efforts to truly be a “force” for healing in the world. Will it be Earth justice? Economic justice for the working poor? Foster children? Homelessness? We have a great track record for financial support for organizations that share our mission – but many feel it is time to engage more directly. Your pledge represents a commitment to this work of outreach and community transformation.

Your pledge is a commitment to liberal religion. As UUs we stand against superstition and fear. We claim the right to religious expression and spiritual growth that doesn't require a creed or belief in a supernatural being. We welcome all with their questions and visions. Our principles help us to aspire to what is most noble about human beings. That alone is worth your support.

I remember when I first became a UU, almost 25 years ago. I was unclear on what it meant to pledge. At the time that I joined the church I can recall sitting on the church patio with someone from the stewardship committee as they showed me the pledge form and asked me to make a financial contribution for the annual budget. I had so many questions that I was uncomfortable asking. What did it mean to pledge? What amount was the right amount to give? What was my obligation to the church community?

Eight years later I was chair of the stewardship committee. It wasn't until I was the one who had to ask people to pledge that I gained an appreciation for what a pledge represents.

Pledging means understanding that we are the funders of our church and accepting the responsibility to making the church better and stronger. It is putting our money where our heart is, where our spirit is. It is an investment in the values that we hold dear and the community that supports these values..

For many of us the whole process of being asked for a pledge makes us uncomfortable. It is like we are asking – what is the church worth to you? That is actually what we are asking. It is what you should be asking yourself - how much of your money are you willing to give to support this community? We don't have to lay it out like a menu of things to buy – because you know in your heart its value to your life and the life of this community. Pledging should make us a bit uncomfortable - we need to stretch beyond the idea of a minimum pledge – to one that represents the value you place on this community and your commitment to sustaining it. And you can stretch no matter what your income, whether you give \$50 a month or \$500.

I have given money over the years as an expression of my gratitude – for the church, for the community that is present for me, for the services of the ministers. Now, as a minister myself, I understand that my pledges were an acknowledgement of my responsibility and commitment to sustain the financial health of the congregation for the benefit of all who come, and all who are yet to come. I appreciate that my pledge is a statement about how much the church means to me and how strongly I share in its vision. I have been enriched by the contributions I made more than any other investment or purchase I could have made. I would not be the person I am today without the congregations of which I have been a part – including this one.

I know that each of you care about this community- many of you give significantly of your time talent and treasure. Others of you are new to the concept of pledging, new to thinking about what your financial commitment means in the context of your values. Others are here for the first time today and learned from Mary Howard testimony that she cares enough about this community to pledge 10% of her income. They learned about the depth of her commitment to this community.

Those of you who are members and friends of this community I challenge you to consider a shift in your thinking– from participant to owner – from purchasing an experience to investing in transformation. Your pledge is a statement of how much our values mean to you - it means putting your money where your mouth is, where your heart is, where your spirit is. We are not consumers of religious experiences – we are the investors, the shareholders. And the return on our investment is much greater than any other way we could spend or invest our money - because the interest we earn is the transformation of our lives and of our world.

So May it Be.