



## Musings on Stewardship – What does good look like?

John DiLeo © 26 May 2024

After today's service, we'll be holding our Annual General Meeting. In three weeks, Jonathan Mason will be leading our service and kicking off our annual pledge drive. The fact these events were coming up got me thinking about our church's finances, and more particularly about what we're *doing* with what we have and what our members give.

At this afternoon's AGM, we'll hear the financial report for last financial year from our Treasurer. I fully expect that, as in previous years, he'll be reporting the majority of our contribution income is received from a small proportion of our membership who give \$1,000 or more each year, while a larger number give something less, and still others make no *documented* contributions at all.

[As an aside, for those who contribute significantly and anonymously by placing cash in the koha basket or through some other means, thank you.]

Throughout the many Christian religions, there is a strong emphasis on the *tithe* – giving a one-tenth portion of your time, talent, and treasure to the Big-C Church.

Within the Unitarian Universalist faith, a common ask is that we give five percent to our home congregation and another five percent to worthy causes in the broader community. UUs are statistically the highest income-earning faith group, while simultaneously being “the faith group that gives least to our own churches,” falling well short of even the five-percent mark.

In a sermon she gave in 2015<sup>i</sup>, UUA's Congregational Giving Director, Reverent Vail Weller asks:

“Why is that?? If we gave of our resources at the level that the Baptists, Mormons, Episcopalians, or Jews do, we would be able to serve the community in amazing ways.”

It *is not* my intention to browbeat you into giving more. Instead, I want to shift our focus to why we don't *already* give more, and what would make each of us *want* to change that...

In his award-winning sermon from 2012<sup>ii</sup>, Reverend Jay Leach raised some highly relevant points:

“Some suggest instead that our common denominator, a low one indeed, may be the collective intoning of a song with the repeated refrain "what's in it for me?" It is a monotonic chorus, skipping over the notes *do* and *re* and landing, repeatedly, on the solitary sound of that one note *mi—mi mi mi*.

He later argues:

“My contention today to you, my co-religionists, is this: the most radical, controversial, countercultural message we offer in our particular liberal religion may not be about marriage equality or economic justice or environmental activism or any other of our social stances as important as those are.

“Our most radical, controversial, countercultural message just may be our affirmation that each of us, every single, individual one of us is a part of an interdependent web of all existence. To make such an affirmation with full integrity suggests that "what's in it for me?" is directly, inextricably, completely entwined in "what's in it for...us?"

“If the web of existence of which we are each a part truly is interdependent, interdependent, then there is really only the common good.”

As a group, I believe we're keenly aware of the interconnectedness of the world in which we live. Recent and current events serve as constant reminders of just how dependent we are on what's going on around the country and the world – various shortages of fresh produce, because flooding around the North Island destroyed entire crops; shockingly high

petrol prices, because there's an ongoing war in Ukraine; continued economic strain and uncertainty, because the United States is a political dumpster fire. It's all connected, and we all feel it daily.

So, if we know we're all dependent on one another, and that the "common good" is what really matters, why aren't we, as a group, more generous in our giving?

I have one idea: perhaps, the question many of *us* are asking ourselves isn't "What's in it for me?" but rather "What good will it do?"

To state it more explicitly: If I give more money to the Auckland Unitarian Church this year, what *elevation of the common good* will come from it?

If you do a Google search on the meaning of stewardship – as I did – you'll find it's generally defined as "the wise use of God's resources to achieve God's purposes."

Rephrasing that in a more UU way: stewardship is the wise use of our resources and talents to achieve our collective purposes.

A foundational element of good stewardship is wise and responsible management. In one online article I found on a site dedicated to the principles of tithing<sup>iii</sup>, we're reminded to "think strategically about how we can utilize...resources for maximum impact."

What, pray tell, are *our* resources?

Well, for starters, we have this building. It's a great facility, in a great location. Through the generosity of donors and the perseverance of key volunteers, this building has received much-needed repairs, our organ has returned from its extended leave of absence, and work continues to make it a safer, more sustainable resource for our community.

Then, there are our people. Our congregation boasts members with medical, community organising, information technology, engineering, education, and financial management backgrounds, among others. We have many and varied hobbies and personal interests.

Through our members and our past engagements, particularly Clay's legacy of advocacy and activism, we have our network of relationships with other community organisations. This includes the existing users of our building.

What *more* could we be doing with what we have? And yet how much more could we be doing if we had *even more*?

Later in her 2015 sermon, Reverend Weller asks the congregation to:

“Think of the soup kitchen we could run each Sunday, serving hundreds of hungry neighbors.  
Think of the houses we could build [here], and the green technology we could help to retrofit our entire area with.  
Think of the co-housing communities we could build, the Unitarian Universalist preschool we could run, the progressive retreat center we could build, the spiritual direction institute we could create.  
All of these are actual and real possibilities. There are so many things that we could do. The sky's really the limit.”

I posit there's a positive feedback loop we need to get working for us. The more our congregation is doing to **visibly** and **impactfully** support and enrich our community (that is, the more obvious it is that we're *making a difference*), the more contributions we'll receive, of time, talent, *and* treasure. I contend this is because we'll attract and retain more new members (increasing the pool of givers), while simultaneously bolstering the confidence of *all* our members that their contributions are doing good (increasing their individual willingness to give).

Then, of course, the more contributions we're receiving, the more we can do to support and enrich our community.

And so on, and so on, and so on.

This leads me, at last, to the key question and challenge I want to put before you: how do we go about “priming that pump”? What are the **best next** things for us to do as a congregation, to make a difference in our larger community and let like-minded Aucklanders and Kiwis know we're here and worth being a part of?

If we can unlock that particular puzzle, my friends, then as Reverend Weller said, “the sky’s really the limit.”

**Meditation / Discussion Topic**

What community initiative(s) would excite you?  
How would we get started?

<sup>i</sup> Vail Weller, “Fire of Commitment,”

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/182782.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> James C. (Jay) Leach, “...the infinite enlargement of the heart...,”

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/2012>

<sup>iii</sup> “A Detailed Guide to Church Stewardship,” <https://get.tithe.ly/blog/stewardship-church>