



# Building Virtuous Circles

Ted Zorn © 12 April 2026

When I agreed -- yet again -- to lead a service at the start of the annual pledge drive, one immediate challenge for me – given my business school background -- was *branding*.

How exactly do you make ‘please help us meet the budget’ sound spiritually uplifting?

You can’t really call the sermon ‘Cash Flow for the Kingdom’ — especially not in a Unitarian church.

And ‘Friends, let us now contemplate deferred maintenance and operating expenses’ does not have quite the same inspirational quality as, say, resurrection.

So this year I was grateful to land on the title *Building Virtuous Circles*, because it sounds much nobler than ‘Ted Talks About Church Finances Again.’

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Now, what I really want to talk about is *momentum*.

About what happens when a community begins to believe in itself. When people show up, contribute, encourage one another, and discover that their shared efforts are not just keeping something alive, but helping it grow stronger.

So let me talk about this idea of *building virtuous circles*.

A virtuous circle is simply a cycle in which good things build on one another. Enthusiasm is contagious. Generosity inspires more generosity.

Participation creates energy. And that shared energy strengthens the community, which then encourages still more participation, as well as hope.

The opposite, of course, is a *vicious* circle. Discouragement lowers participation. Lower participation makes everything harder. That creates more anxiety and less hope, and the cycle feeds on itself.

Every community lives with the possibility of both.

I felt that very strongly when Clay died.

His death had a big effect on me, as I know it did on many of us. Clay was a big reason I kept coming back when I was a new member here almost six years ago. He brought something special to this congregation, and when he died I felt grief, but I also felt worry.

I knew there had been times in the past — long before I was a member — when membership was very low, and I suspect energy was too. And my worry, my fear, was that might happen to us again.

Part of that fear came from experience. During Clay's illness and for a while after his passing, I coordinated services, and I learned firsthand how difficult it is, as a volunteer, to schedule good services every Sunday led by other volunteers — services people find meaningful, thoughtful, and spiritually nourishing.

And yet — we have done it.

Not perfectly. Certainly not effortlessly. But we have done it.

Week after week, people have stepped forward. Guest speakers have enriched us. Members and friends have offered ideas, care, leadership, and loads of practical help to make it all work. And I continue to come here and leave filled with inspiration, wisdom, and warmth from all of you.

That matters.

Because communities are not built only by structures and budgets. They are also built by trust, memory, hope, and steady work.

We become what we repeatedly do together. If we repeatedly express negativity or discouragement, if we withdraw and exude low energy, those things begin to define us.

But if we repeatedly express warmth, generosity, shared purpose, and engage in collective action, those begin to define us too.

That is how virtuous circles begin — and build.

Not with magic. Not with perfection. Not with one heroic person saving the day.

They build when ordinary people do what they can, together, and begin to see that their efforts are making a difference.

Last week, Rachel talked about resurrection. She suggested that the Easter story of resurrection can be understood not only as a story about Jesus rising from death, but as the

resurrection of love, compassion, and the spirit of nonviolent resistance in those who followed him. And she suggested that we as UUs may find resurrection too in the loving fellowship of our community, as we strive together to resist oppression and make our communities more loving and inclusive.

That idea stayed with me.

Because there is a virtuous circle in that too.

When we come together in acts of protest, service, generosity, or care, those acts do good in the world. But they also do something to us – individually and collectively.

They bind us together in solidarity. They deepen our sense of shared purpose. They make our community stronger, which in turn allows us to have greater impact.

The action strengthens the community, and the strengthened community supports further action.

***That*** is a virtuous circle.

And that matters not only spiritually, but practically.

Momentum changes how a community feels. It changes how willing people are to volunteer. It changes how visitors experience us. It changes how confidently we can imagine the future.

And yes, it changes whether we will eventually be in a position to hire a new minister.

It can be tempting to think a minister will save us.

But I think just as often works the other way around. A healthy congregation creates the conditions that attract good ministry. A hopeful and generous congregation makes ministry sustainable.

In other words, the path toward calling a minister is not passive waiting. It is active community-building.

Some of that work is visible and inspiring. Some of it is less glamorous.

Last year we created a new constitution and new financial structures. That may sound boring to some of you — it is not my favourite subject either — but it was necessary and important for the health of our congregation. And it took a lot of work by some of our members to make it happen.

And those efforts – and our MANY other efforts -- are bearing fruit. We are building a virtuous circle.

I'm not sure how many of you know this, but financially, this has been a very successful year for us.

We ended the year financially stronger than expected, bringing in donations above the amounts budgeted in almost every category, including -- importantly -- the general congregation fund (which pays for operating expenses) and the ministerial fund that we started last year, which we're building up to put us into position to hire a new minister.

Our total pledge amount is up quite a lot relative to recent years.

And given our pledge drive started quite late last year, we did much of this in just eight months.

Now, we're not now wealthy enough that we can start spending up large with all that cash – no retreats in Fiji, sorry -- not by a long shot.

But these results show that we are not just treading water financially. We are **building momentum**.

And because of this momentum, we are able to set goals that build on our success.

Now, we would be doing very well to just repeat last year's results.

But the targets you'll see on the pledge form represent a small increase on this year's achievements. And I believe we can hit those targets.

That is not taking a defensive posture, or a matter of just holding on until we get a minister. Our posture is an aspirational one, but grounded in hard evidence that we do have momentum.

And that brings us to today, because this service marks the start of our annual pledge drive.

A pledge drive is, of course, about money. Churches need money to function. We need to pay bills, maintain our building, support programmes, and create the stability without which vision remains only vision.

But a pledge drive is also about belief.

A pledge is a vote of confidence. It says: this community matters to me. It is worth sustaining. It has a future. And I want to help strengthen that future.

Congregational flourishing rarely comes from one person doing everything. It comes from many people giving what they can.

One person offers money.

Another manages our money.

Another manages our building rentals.

Another brings food.

Another makes the tea.

Another welcomes newcomers.

Another serves on a committee.

Another tidies up after services and events.

Another quietly keeps things running behind the scenes.

And together, those gifts build community.

This year, we have created another way to strengthen our future: a bequest process. That gives people a way to support the church through a gift in their will.

I am personally enthusiastic about this, because it is something I have been wanting to do myself. I'm afraid the church won't get rich off of my estate.

But a bequest says: I believe this community should outlast me. I believe it should continue to nurture, challenge, and inspire people in the future. That too is part of building virtuous circles.

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It's very easy to underestimate the ripple effects of our own participation.

You may think your pledge is modest.

You may think your volunteering is small.

You may think your presence on a Sunday hardly matters.

But in communities like ours, everything matters.

Your presence helps create the atmosphere someone else walks into.

Your giving helps create the stability someone else relies on.

Your warmth helps create the welcome someone else needs.

The answer to what kind of community we are does not come only from what we say. It comes from what we do, together, over time.

So as we begin this year's pledge drive, I hope we will think not in terms of pressure, but possibility.

Not in terms of scarcity, but momentum.

Not in terms of fear, but virtuous circles.

What circle do we want to strengthen?

What kind of future do we want to make more likely?

I believe we can build on the many good things already happening here so that in the coming years, we are not merely surviving, but stronger, more confident, more connected, and more ready for what comes next.

I believe that because I have seen signs of it among us.

So let us build.

Let us build trust.

Let us build generosity.

Let us build confidence.

Let us build the habits, structures, and relationships that create a flourishing congregation.

Let us strengthen the virtuous circles already beginning to turn among us.

And let us do so knowing that every act of commitment, every pledge, every gift of time, every welcome, every moment of care helps create the future we hope for — including -- soon -- calling a new minister from a position of strength.

May we be a people who build on success.

May we be a people who support and encourage one another.

May we be a people who turn hope into action.

And may the circles we build together become strong enough to carry this community forward with love and joy.

Amen

## Meditation / Discussion Questions

- What would you like to see us do to continue to build our community?
- What are things you've noticed that have helped us build momentum in the church?