

Imagine, if you will, that our church is a reservoir and we, the congregation, are the boats on that reservoir. Bear with me. When there is a draught, as California has experienced for five years, that reservoir draws down. You all remember pictures of what Lake Oroville looked like not so many months ago. All those boats crowded together in the middle of what remained of the lake. Hundreds of feet of muddy canyon walls towering above them. Boat ramps unusable. Releases from the dam restricted. The benefits of the lake, both to the boaters (our internal community) and the downstream users (the external community), are restricted. Water for farmers, for power production, for fish, for recreation, is limited. The dam is not serving its purpose.

I would liken our congregation to the reservoir in this way. In 1969, our called minister, Art Wilmot, left for a larger congregation. For reasons lost to time, we chose not to call another minister, to be lay lead. Our membership shrank from 100 to as few as 10, according to our historical records. But in a multiyear process, starting about 12 years ago, we began to come out of that long draught. We sought outside help, including professional ministers, most recently Sydney and Denis. With strong lay leadership and their help, we have made great strides. We have built a beautiful sanctuary and called a settled minister, your first in more than 50 years.

However, we are not recovered from the draught. We strive to grow. We strive toward a sustainable budget. When we are small, when we are inadequately funded, we are crowded together, insular. Our ministries to each other and to the wider community, are restricted. We don't have the human capital and financial capital to fund ministries in the ways that we dream of. Ministries such as social action, environmental justice, youth ministry, adult religious exploration, music. We don't have the energy to reach out. It is more problematic to get new people in, as it is difficult to get boats into a drawn-down reservoir.

Alright, I know that some of you are thinking about the recent near disaster at the Oroville dam. Let's see you fit that into your comparison, Bryan. Well, I admit that too much money and too many members too fast is an unlikely scenario for our church. But consider businesses that grow too fast. They experience growth problems. Sometimes they fail. As I said, I have a hard time imagining that for our church, but wouldn't it be nice to be thinking about how we manage our growth rather than thinking about how we grow? To be thinking about how we expand our

existing ministries and begin new ones, rather than thinking about how we limit damage due to budget cutbacks?

Our mission statement, adopted in 2003, still reads well, is still current and appropriate. It says: The mission of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Chico is to serve our community by welcoming all, supporting religious freedom and practice, encouraging spiritual and intellectual growth, and being actively involved in social action, all within the framework of Unitarian Universalist Principles.

Let me break that down, since it is a mouthful. We serve our community--our internal community, i.e., each other, and our external community, i.e., Chico, Butte County and the larger world. We do this through living our UU Principles. You know, or maybe you don't, if you are new to UU, the ones that say that we all have inherent worth and dignity. That we support democratic process and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We accept and encourage spiritual growth in one another, even if that spiritual growth looks different than our own. We believe in justice, equity and compassion as bywords to live by.// And finally, we are all interconnected. On this last point, quoting scripture, specifically Matthew 25:40, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' And the me is us, each of us. You don't have to believe in God to believe in these words. And not to leave behind any of you who are curious, our principles can be found near the beginning of the gray hymnal, or you can Google UU Seven Principles.

There is a need for what we bring to the table in today's world. There is a larger need than there was prior to November 8th. There are issues of sanctuary, for immigrants and for refugees. ICE is apparently being given much wider latitude in rounding up and deporting immigrants with minor, or no, violations other than that they are in the country without visas, trying to make a better life for themselves and for their families, trying to escape violence. And, by-the-way, supporting the U.S. economy in very large ways, as we know well here in California. There is apparent religious discrimination in recent executive orders banning entry to persons from certain predominantly Muslim countries.

We believe in justice, equity and compassion.

A Pandora's box of intolerance and hate was released during the presidential campaign and, despite some minor overtures from the President, continues. It will take more than overtures to put the lid back on that box. Only last weekend, nearly 200 gravesites were desecrated in a Jewish cemetery in Philadelphia. More than 200 headstones were toppled recently in a cemetery in Missouri. There have been other acts of hate against Jews. According to the Jewish Community Center Association of North America, there have been a total of 90 incidents in 30 states and Canada targeting Jews since January.¹ Muslims, women, immigrants, persons with minority sexual identities or preferences, all are targets in this environment of intolerance and hate.

Gloria Steinem, the iconic feminist and author spoke on campus last Wednesday. Some of you attended. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend Ms. Steinem's talk. I read Ms. Steinem in my mid-20's in my own personal awakening around women's issues after the woman I was dating became anorexic. What she wrote was eye opening for me. Anyway, on Wednesday, Ms. Steinem reiterated what I have said from this pulpit, what has been said by others: in our movements, in our marches, we need to connect the different types of oppression. Oppression, no matter where it is, is connected by fear and intolerance that breeds hate.

We all have worth and dignity.

The United States is stepping back from a leadership role in combating climate change. Within our country, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, does not believe in the mission of the agency he is headed. This brings pause, even fear, to those of us who believe that the multiple threats to the environment--higher temperatures, habitat loss, extinction, spreading deserts--are a matter of social and environmental justice and an existential threat to life on this planet as we know it.

We support democratic process and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We at UUFC have a role to play. As your minister, I bring our liberal voice to City Council, where I recently gave the opening prayer, urging Council to see beyond their differences, to see the people whom their decisions affect. As your minister, I bring our voice to campus, where I was part of a panel discussion on the

intersection between faith and politics. As your minister, I bring our voice to our local radio station, KZFR, where I was recently a guest on the Peace and Justice show, discussing environmental justice. As your minister, on the 15th of this month, I will be bringing our UU perspective to the topic of reconciliation in a combined Wednesday Lenten service at Faith Lutheran Church. I was invited to do this by my liberal clergy colleagues and friends.

But I am just one person. There are others in our congregation who step up in many ways, to help our internal community and to work for justice and compassion in our larger community. You have heard that we were well represented at the Women's March, both here in Chico and in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. Here in UUFC, a small group of dedicated individuals in the Sunshine Committee provides meals, rides and listening ears to persons in our congregation experiencing hardship. These are just two examples of how we care for our community, how we live our mission. I could name others.

But there is so much more we could do with larger numbers and with greater funding. This may come as a surprise to many of you, but UU's are historically among the least generous of religious denominations when it comes to financially supporting their church. Maybe this has to do with our roots in New England, an area of the country not known for its generosity with money. Maybe it has to do with our roots as individualists. In any case, it is true for our denomination, across the country. Today, let us celebrate that we have broken that mold, that we are as generous with our treasure as we are with our time and talent.

So let us celebrate today. Let us celebrate who we are. Let us celebrate what we have to give to the world, what we are giving to the world. And let us celebrate how much we are giving of our treasure to support the important work, the important ministries, that we do, and the important ministries that we have yet to do, as we grow in generosity and in numbers.

May it be so.

¹ Michael Rubinkam, The Associated Press. *Jewish centers cope with bomb threats, vandalism.* In The Chico Enterprise Record, February 28, 2017.