

# **“Holding History While Looking to the Future”**

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on November 7, 2021

It has been a practice for longer than I know here at UUFB to hold a pledge drive this time every year. That practice continues this year and we are currently engaged in that annual pledge drive. Each year, Fellowship members and friends are asked to consider making a financial pledge. And each year many such pledges, from a few dollars to thousands of dollars, are made. Every pledge is important, and every pledge is greatly appreciated. The financial pledges received during the annual pledge drive make up the majority of our Fellowship's income for the year ahead. The Board and the Finance Committee create the budget for the coming year based on the amount that UUFB members and friends pledge to contribute for the year ahead.

As this year's pledge drive progresses, all of us are encouraged to ask ourselves some questions as we decide about making a pledge. If you have attended, or will be attending, one of the cottage meetings that are planned, you will be able to consider and respond to four questions that have been developed. Here are a few other questions you might want to think about. What does being a part of this Fellowship mean to you? How has this Fellowship made a difference in your life? What are your hopes for the Fellowship in the year ahead, and in the years ahead? Through considering and answering questions such as these each of us may ascertain our willingness and ability to make a financial pledge. I encourage you to send in your pledge form whether you make a financial pledge or not. Through the course of the COVID pandemic, the ways we would typically use to recognize who feels connected and committed to the Fellowship have been significantly reduced. So this year it is especially important that we hear from you. Sending in a pledge form is a convenient way to let us know that you value your continuing connection with the Fellowship.

In planning for and creating the coming year's budget, the Board considers what will be needed to keep the Fellowship strong and functioning well, not just for next year but also for many years to come. And in the process of determining what will be needed in the future, the Board looks to the history of the Fellowship. That history is the foundation we build upon. One of the places we can see some of the history of the Fellowship is UUFB's previous Vision Statement. That prior Vision Statement was adopted in 2005 and, at the time, it was envisioned that the goals contained in it would be accomplished by 2015. The goals were quite lofty, which is admirable. Some but not all of the goals were accomplished by 2015. In fact some of the goals remain to be accomplished yet today.

Some of what has been accomplished can be found in the very first sentence of that Vision Statement. It states, “We envision our community as a mid-size congregation of 150-300 members and friends, growing, and recognized as a welcoming place for those who value our liberal principles.” UUFB currently has 143 members and 77 people who identify as friends. In regards to the Fellowship growing, from 2010 to 2020 our membership increased by close to 50%. Even since we had to begin holding Sunday Services exclusively online because of the COVID virus, people have continued to find us and inquire about how they might become more engaged in Fellowship events and activities. And when it comes to being welcoming, what Cami shared earlier in the service certainly speaks to how at least some people who enter our doors feel we do at welcoming newcomers. And we are definitely recognized as a welcoming place for those who value our liberal principles in the larger community. One of the many reasons for that recognition may be that the minister who preceded me, Rev. Nina Gray, made national news by officiating at one of the first same sex marriages in Montana. When it comes to social justice issues, UUFB members and friends show up at public events such as rallies, marches and demonstrations. And we put our money where our values are. On the 2nd Sunday of every month our offering goes to support organizations that put our values into action. In May of this year we gave over \$1,700 to support HRDC's Housing First Village, which is a community of tiny homes for homeless people. And next Sunday our offering will again go to HRDC, this time to support the Warming Center, where many homeless people find shelter during the coldest months of the year.

Our caring and generosity is also shared with those who are part of this Fellowship. Cami mentioned some of her experiences with this caring and generosity in the Stewardship Moment this morning. During my time as your minister numerous people in the Fellowship have shared their own experiences of receiving caring, support and encouragement from others in the congregation. When I first read *The Story Blanket*, our Story for All Ages this morning, I was reminded of what I have witnessed again and again in this Fellowship. My experience has been and continues to be that when people of this Fellowship recognize a need, they give of what they have to address that need. This giving, when it occurs within the Fellowship, creates a web of mutuality that supports, protects and nurtures all of us.

As I mentioned previously, we haven't yet accomplished everything that was contained in that 2005 Vision Statement. Let me give you a specific example. One sentence in the second paragraph of the Statement begins with the following, "We have a full-time minister and a full-time religious education director..." While there are definitely times when it feels like my position is full-time, it is actually only 4/5ths-time. And the Coordinator of Religious Education position, which Beth Witte holds, is currently less than half time. As we hold the history, and the goal, contained in this sentence, we also look to the future and what it will take to make this dream, this hope, a reality. With my planned retirement at the end of June next year, the Board has already identified finding a new minister as a high priority. The Board recently met with Rev. Sarah Schurr, our Pacific Western Region staff contact person, to get information about the minister search process. She shared some important information with them. She let the Board know that if UUFB is going to attract a minister to Bozeman, where the cost of housing has gone through the roof in the past several years, the position of minister will need to be full-time. So the Board is proposing that we set our sights on hiring a full-time interim minister to begin shortly after I retire. Hiring an interim minister will allow the Board and the Fellowship the time that will be required to plan and prepare for the search for a full-time settled minister.

And as the COVID case numbers drop to levels where we can meet in our building again, we will have to ramp up our Religious Education program. There is good reason to believe that once we are meeting in person again, the number of families with children and youth coming through our doors will increase significantly. Young families and young adults constitute the future of the Fellowship. It seems to me that the Board's stated intention to increase the number of hours for the Coordinator of Religious Education position is not just appropriate, it is wise. In proposing this increase, the Board is both holding history and looking to the future.

I'm going to shift my focus now and talk about my own thoughts about this year's pledge drive. In my ministerial career I haven't delivered a stewardship sermon that one would identify as a "give more than you planned" message. In the past I have always felt awkward about doing so because I know that my salary is a significant portion of the annual budget. So my thinking has been that if I were to share a "give more than you planned" sermon it would be received as a "you need to pay me more" message. And I have never wanted to be perceived the way I think about some of the televangelist preachers I have seen. In case you don't know what I am saying here let me be clear. I have never wanted to be thought of as a minister who preaches a "send us your money" sermon. Today those issues aren't a concern for me. They aren't a concern for me because I will be retiring at the end of June next year. That means I will only be with you for the first half of next year. My hope is that you will have a full-time interim minister for the second half of the year.

As I think about the goal of a full-time minister for this Fellowship—a goal that was stated in the UUFB Vision Statement adopted 16 years ago—I think about what will be needed to reach that goal. I also think about what I can do, what I can give, to make this goal a reality. I have come up with a few ideas of what I can do, as well as what the Board and Fellowship can do, to increase the possibility that a full-time minister will follow in my footsteps. I want to share with you some ideas I have come up with.

First, during my time as your minister I have not taken a sabbatical, which, according to my Letter of Agreement, I was to do in the first six years of my ministry with you. A Ministerial Sabbatical Fund was created several years ago to cover the cost associated with my taking a sabbatical. Since that sabbatical didn't occur, that money is now available to assist in some aspect of getting a new minister. The money didn't and doesn't

belong to me or to any minister. It is the Fellowship's money. It can now be used as the Board and the congregation see fit.

Second, I have recommended to the Board that they give me a lower cost of living raise than they give the other staff. Since my salary is a significant portion of the budget, reducing the pay increase I would receive leaves more money for other staff positions, including for a new minister. The lower cost-of-living amount won't make a significant difference in my life, but it might just make a difference in what is possible when it comes to staffing levels at UUFB.

And finally, I have decided to increase the amount of my monthly pledge for the six months I will be with you next year. The increase isn't a large amount, certainly not enough to cover all of the cost of living increase for the other current UUFB staff members. And yet I feel it is important, as we heard in "The Story Blanket," to take yarn from the blanket I have and create something that will benefit the members and friends of this Fellowship in the year ahead.

So as our annual pledge drive continues, I would invite you to think about what this Fellowship has meant to you and what it means to you. I would invite you to think about what those who have come before you have given to make this community what it is today. And as you decide about making a pledge this year, I would ask you to consider all of those who will benefit from the financial contribution you might make. When I say all of those I include those people who are currently members and friends as well as those who will find and join this community in the future. I am certain that as the Gallatin Valley population continues to grow there will be more and more people who will seek us out. They will seek us out because of our liberal values. They will seek us out because of the warm and caring welcome we offer. And they will seek us out because they hear about our work to make this community, and the world, a better place to live, not just for some people but for everyone. I invite you to think of what I have shared with you this morning as you make a decision about a pledge. And finally, I encourage you to be as generous in making a pledge to UUFB this year as you are and have been with the members and friends of the Fellowship and the social justice issues the Fellowship has supported over the years.

Thank you, and bless you all.