

Becoming a Public Church
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Channing Memorial Church
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It was as close as I will ever get to being a Game Show host ... on Sunday, April 11th everyone in the pews was given an envelope containing cash. That's right everyone in church was given money: adults and children, Channing members and guests. The Social Action Committee prepared the envelopes in random amounts ranging from \$5 to \$500. No one jumped up and down in the aisles and no confetti fell from the ceiling but the congregation was buzzing with excitement. Some people had single bills. A child opened his envelope to discover \$100.

Altogether the funds totaled \$5000 from a bequest we received from Margit Baum. She was our neighbor and a friend of Ruth and Sam Jernigan. Margit Baum died in 2001 at the age of 94. Her siblings and husband had died before her and she had no descendants. So, her will specified that funds be given to Touro Synagogue, Emmanuel Church, Saint Joseph's Church, and Channing Memorial Church for a specific purpose—the assistance, care and relief of poor and needy persons in the city of Newport.

So, when the money was given out, you were also given an assignment—to make a difference in the city where this house of worship resides. We called the project “Neighbors Helping Neighbors”. Each person was empowered to choose a person or organization that might benefit from a donation. You were welcome to give the cash to a person in need, purchase desired supplies for a person or group, contribute to an agency offering services in Newport or to work in partnership with others to make your seed money grow.

We are not the first congregation to try such a project. We were inspired by First Parish in Weston, MA, a UU congregation who launched “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” this Fall as an all-parish project. Many other faith communities have done something like it inspiring people to “Pay It Forward” that is, find creative ways to use funds for generous action. However, except for the Social Action Committee and the Margit Baum Fund Committee, no one knew of our plans here at Channing. Part of the genius of “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” was that there was no application process whoever was in church that morning was entrusted with the money.

The reactions that morning were fascinating. Some of you knew immediately where to contribute the money—a person who you cared about or an organization you knew well. Several expressed gratitude about having the opportunity to give. Parents welcomed the chance to talk to their children about Newport and the many ways to be of service.

One person confided to me that by coming to church that morning, her life had been made more complicated. Another expressed relief that they had only been given a

small amount of money that having hundreds of dollars would have been too great a responsibility. Others wondered how \$5 could possibly make a difference.

For those of you who were here on April 11th, I invite you to reflect on your initial reaction to “Neighbors Helping Neighbors”. If you were not here, please use your imagination. What was it like to be entrusted with money and to be given the challenge to make a difference in the city of Newport? Did you know immediately what to do? Were you energized by the prospect of giving? Were you wary about making the “right” decision and overwhelmed by the responsibility? Did you use this as an opportunity to learn more about your neighbors, talking with others about the needs and programs in Newport? Was this a decision that you made in private quietly passing the money along as an individual? Did you pool your money with family or friends? Did you invite others to match the funds or to join you in a project?

I am so proud of the many ways the \$5000 moved outward from this religious community to create positive change in Newport. What is equally important is for each person to reflect on how this project changed you. Were you ready to put your values into action?

Who are the poor and needy anyway? One mother shared with me the morning the money was given out that her young son wanted to give the money to a neighbor who she had helped by giving rides and buying groceries. This led to a good conversation with him that their neighbor was not poor but an older person in need of physical assistance. I heard from Halcyon, our Director of Religious Education that a group of boys were planning to purchase a Game Boy for Channing so that the “poor and needy” could come play video games with them here. Of course, this led to a conversation about whether they were really thinking about helping others or not.

After the service today, we will be having a Celebration in which you can learn of the many ways the funds were used to help our neighbors. I would like to highlight a few initiatives.

Cadence and Jesse Hansen received \$5 and \$75. They already donate to a number of charitable organizations but decided that they wanted to be more personally involved in the donation. So, they called around to several organizations and found the best fit with the Boys and Girls Club where they were informed that basketball is their most popular sport which they are able to play year round and they are always in need of new basketballs. Over the course of their discernment, they shared about “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” with friends and co-workers who expressed interest in the outcome. When they settled on a project, they asked friends and colleagues to join them in buying basketballs. Cadence and Jesse were surprised by the positive response. \$80 would have purchased two quality balls. The Hansens matched that amount and others chipped in. On May 20th, a dozen balls were delivered to the Boys and Girls Club of Newport. The initial money increased five-fold!

Another inspiring project was Laura Walker hosted what she called a Spring Fling at her house. She invited friends to match the \$10 in her envelope and to clean out their closets—Spring Cleaning. As a result, \$70 and seven bags of clothes were donated to the McKinley Shelter on Washington Square.

I have received notes from the Edward King House Senior Center and the Martin Luther King Community Center expressing thanks to the congregation for your contributions. Over the next year, the Social Action Committee will continue to feature in the newsletter the many ways that these funds have made a difference.

However, when the last dollar has been given and accounted for “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” should not end. One of the reasons this congregation exists is for the greater good. Michael Durall, a church consultant, who has preached from this pulpit, wrote in the Fall edition of the UU World magazine, “Unitarian Universalism can’t yet claim that the greater good is its primary purpose, but it should.”

In 1999, when this congregation put forward a Ministerial Search Packet looking for a settled minister, included in the materials were the results of a survey outlining Channing’s strengths and weaknesses, history and vision as well as the skills and style you were seeking in the next minister. Channing Church was a good match for me in that you were committed to shared ministry. The year you had successfully run the church without professional leadership gave you an appreciation that the religious community working together makes real our liberal religious values.

However, in the Fall of 1999, the congregation asserted that Social Action and Denomination Activities were “of little consequence”. Not only that, the majority of the congregation believed that Channing was addressing social concerns not “very well” or “poorly” but “adequately”. Most felt that although the church helps to clarify values relating to issues, actions should be independent of the Channing community.

You are about to embark on another Ministerial Search process and an Interim period to discern the direction of this community. As you do so, my prayer is that you will commit to becoming a Public Church.

Does that mean that Channing is currently a Private Church? William Ellery Channing, for whom this church is dedicated, defined “self-culture” as a reason for religion. That here we are given the tools to nurture the seed of Divinity within us to become our best selves. Our Unitarian ancestors claimed “salvation by character” that our words, deeds, and experiences in this life ultimately matter.

Many people come to this church for personal inspiration, for the support of community and for the connection of fellowship. This Sanctuary exists for the healing and comfort of our innermost selves. Here we are reminded of our inherent worth and given the strength to face areas of brokenness in our private lives. However, this private sphere matter only in as much as it motivates us to an outward focus.

I was delighted that the window in the West transept was returned just in time for the special celebration on Sunday. The images depict a verse of the Christian Scriptures, Matthew 25:35, *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* Truly we gather in this place to celebrate life and the opportunities great and small to be of service to one another.

Many congregations are making that real by choosing to give away the Sunday collection every week to a local or global cause. People feel motivated to come to church knowing that their spare change can make a difference when joined with others in their community. My colleagues report that this weekly practice of giving away the collection plate does not decrease the church budget but actually increases pledges as people are inspired to support a religious community with an outward-focus.

I hope that the spirit of “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” will encourage you to think creatively about ways this congregation can engage in public ministry. Although there are some shining examples through out history, it is difficult for an individual or family to influence the direction of society however, when people of conscience join together to stand for justice, corruption, ignorance, inequality, and wrong-doing can be overcome.

I know that many of you are involved with causes and organizations as individuals. The world needs each one of us to be generous in sharing our passions with others and creating teams to work together. I know that many of you know of significant needs and deficiencies in this city. The world needs each one of us to share what we know with others so gaps in services and areas of brokenness come to light and can be addressed.

Social Action is not an extra-curricular activity or something that others do on our behalf. Our personal faith must express itself in public action. In the words of Michael Eric Dyson, “Justice is what love looks like when it speaks in public.”