

Michael and CJ Cogswell

You Are Welcome Here

My husband Michael and I are one of those rare things that y'all usually don't see moving to Memphis— Canadians! Canada is the land of poutine, maple syrup and butter tarts. Our lives would be so different if it weren't for Canadian discoveries like Hawaiian pizza, instant mashed potatoes, and our greatest export—the TV show “Schitt's Creek”.

You know, we even talk different than Americans We don't have dollar bills, we have coins called “loonies” and “toonies”. When you order your coffee at Tim Horton's (Timmies), it's a double-double.

We Canadians apologize for everything. If there was a “national word”, it would “sorry”. But it's pronounced like the word “sore”— “sorey”. But the most common thing you hear from Canadians is the word at the end of just about every sentence. As in, “Reverend Sam had a great sermon last week, eh?” It's the Canadian way of getting others to agree with what we are saying. “Eh?” invites your agreement and involvement.

I've been a Unitarian-Universalist for almost forty years now. Raised in a Pentecostal faith, I felt I was a square peg in a round hole and started exploring different faiths. That included some Eastern religions during my “hippie days” crisscrossing the country following the Grateful Dead in a 1967 VW bus. In the end, I discovered that I'm a humanist. I don't have any supernatural beliefs and yet—I absolutely love church! My happiness comes from belonging to a spiritual community of different faiths and beliefs.

So, why do Michael and I pledge and support this amazing community of The Church of the River? We support our church because as Unitarian-Universalists, it doesn't matter if you are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian or atheist: you are welcome here!

As Unitarian-Universalists, it doesn't matter if you are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans. We don't judge you by who you love. And yes, you are welcome here!

As Unitarian-Universalists, we believe in a woman's right to control her own body. And if you have had to make that difficult decision with a pregnancy, then, yes, you are welcome here!

As Unitarian-Universalists, we believe taking care of our green planet is fundamental to who we are. And if you recycle your garbage, compost, believe that greenhouse gasses are polluting our hills and valleys then, yes, you are welcome here!

As Unitarian-Universalists, it doesn't matter if you have crossed the southern border, or the northern border, to be with us. Yes, you are welcome here!

And finally, as Unitarian-Universalists, we love that you are in community with us. And yes, we are all welcome here!

Chloe Starns

The Church of the River Gives Me Hope

Good morning. I'm Chloe Starns, and I've been going to this church since before I was born—literally. My mom started coming here when she was pregnant with me. Now I'm a senior in high school and this time next year, I'll be away at college. So I've been thinking a lot about my hopes for the future, for myself, our church, and the world.

Right now, I'm planning on majoring in environmental science, which has made me think a lot about our seventh principle, about respect for the interdependent web of all existence. As my generation is forced to deal with the consequences of global warming, it makes me truly appreciate our church and the effort it took to become a green sanctuary. In fact, all seven Unitarian Universalist principles speak to me and give me great hope for the future. Seeing the pride flag hanging in the back of the sanctuary today—an idea borne out of our youth group trip to Boston—symbolizes our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of each person. I've tried to put into action our second principle—justice, equity, and compassion in human relations—by volunteering at the soup kitchen and marching for social justice. I voted for the very first time in the election last week, because this church helped me understand our fifth principle, the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. While college for many people is a time for them to begin their search for truth and meaning, I have already started mine here at church. Because of our fifth principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, I haven't felt forced to feel or believe a certain set of beliefs. I have been encouraged and guided by the congregation to find my own truths and beliefs on my own terms.

So this church obviously has a very big impact on me, and I think it does on all of you too. In today's world, where it seems we are in a constant cycle of bad news, always waiting for the next horrible storyline, whether it be mass shootings, political strife, natural disasters, wars, or famine, being able to come to this space once a week is like a breath of fresh air. In this place, I'm reminded that the world is more than just the bad news, that there is still hope for us yet.

In this place, we get to start every Sunday with deep breaths to keep us grounded. In this place, Reverend Sam inspires us and lifts us up with his sermons. In this place, surrounded by people who think the way I do, I don't feel as alone against the world. In this place, I feel a sense of community among people that I love and respect. This place means everything to me, and it should mean everything to you. This place gives hope, and we must give in return. We all have to do our part to help sustain and grow this church. I truly believe that, so I'm about to do something I've never done before.

I'm going to make a pledge, my very first pledge, right now. I'm going to do it by text, because that's what's easiest for me. Now, I can't pledge much, because I'm 18, I don't have a job, and I have to pay for college. But if I can commit to a monthly pledge, you can, too. It's not about how much you give, it's about making a commitment to support this church on a regular basis. We all have to do our part. If you've never pledged before, this is the year to start.

I'm going to give a monthly pledge until I leave for college. And wherever I go to college, I plan to attend and support a Unitarian Universalist church wherever I may be. And when I come back home in four years, my hope is that, thanks to your pledges, I'll find that my church, The Church of The River, is even more vibrant and active than it is today, touching even more lives, and having an even bigger impact in the community and in the world. We give, and we give we hope.

Thank you.

Deede Wyatt

Our Journey to Church of the River

Paul Cook asked if Robert or I could talk about what belonging to Church of the River meant because we are long time members, having joined in the late 1980's. That got me started down a long road of reflecting upon our religious backgrounds (or lack thereof). And I realized that we actually met when we were both students at Vanderbilt University at a religiously-connected event, a Vanderbilt Interfaith Association work project to fix up a home in a low income area near the Vanderbilt campus to be used as a recreation center by the neighborhood children. Robert didn't really say much to me then since he was focused on the Vanderbilt basketball game on the radio.

I got a phone call a few days later from Robert, who then went by Jethro, his middle name, inviting me to attend the Nashville Unitarian Universalist Church on a Sunday morning and then have brunch. Back then the male to female ratio at Vanderbilt was around 3 to 1 and getting dates on a Friday or Saturday night could be a challenge. But most of us had no plans for Sunday mornings. So our first date was at a UU church.

As it happened, most of my good friends in high school belonged to the Wausau Universalist Unitarian Church and I had attended a few of their youth group meetings. By junior high in upstate New York and high school in Wisconsin my parents had pretty much given up on going to church except on Easter Sunday so I didn't have a "church home", as they say in the South. When I was in grade school in California my parents would drive my sister and me to a huge Presbyterian church for Sunday school and drop us off while they went out to brunch. So that was about the extent of my church upbringing, although I did manage to score a Bible at some sort of communion ceremony.

Robert, in contrast, lived in the same small town in Northeast Georgia and in the same house growing up and attended the same Baptist church. His mother was Canadian and had belonged to the Anglican Church so when she married his father and moved to Rome Georgia she attended the Episcopal Church. Robert's dad was happy to change religious alliances and enjoyed the pageantry of the more formal church service. Robert started out as an Episcopalian as well, but apparently was not well behaved in the children's area and he was asked to leave. His mother then took him across the street to the Baptist church where all the other members of the Wyatt family were in attendance. And there he stayed, even joining a Baptist student group at Vanderbilt until he lost his religion, as they say. He came to realize that the Baptist Church was not a paragon of inclusiveness.

We were married in a congregational church in Nashville by the Vanderbilt chaplain after I graduated and Robert was half way through medical school, and that was our last church visit except for various friends' weddings over the years. It wasn't until we were living in Lexington, Kentucky, for the second time that we started thinking that maybe we should join a church, probably because by then we had young children. And we turned to the Lexington Unitarian Universalist Church, which was a very free-spirited place. The minister did the service only every other week and the congregation did the other Sundays. It was situated out on a large swath of land and very much a part of nature, although our setting here is unrivaled.

When we moved to Memphis, we at first started attending the UU Fellowship, which was then held in the renegade Prescott Memorial Baptist church building in Southeast Memphis. Then Robert began to feel the need for more of a church presence and he tried out the Church of the River and eventually persuaded me to come along. At first I was very reluctant to embrace this new church with its very formal worship service. The thing that grated on me the most was the old hymnals, which used only the masculine form--everything was "he", "his" or "man".

But we came to embrace this more formal service and savored the tranquility of the setting on the river bluff. Burton Carley's amazing and captivating sermons kept us coming back. And it wasn't too long until the hymnals were replaced. Our daughters now had an answer to questions from others about their religion, although sometimes saying you are a Unitarian Universalist raises more questions than it answers. But in this very religious part of the world it is good to have a church home.

Our younger daughter, Laura, participated in religious education classes, was Santa Lucia during the Christmas Candlelight Service not once but twice, and was able to use Sue Ferguson, the Religious Education director at the time, as a reference when she applied for a job at Seesel's grocery. How cool is that? She went through the Our Whole Lives program and attended confirmation classes at Burton's house. Having a religious education program where children are encouraged to explore and learn rather than be taught what they should believe is priceless.

Over the years, we have been enriched by various church activities. I have read and discussed books in River Readers that I never would have thought to pick up on my own. Friendships have been made in Soup for the Soul, which provides support and fellowship. I've "worked my way up" in our monthly soup kitchen and now am the one who shops at the Food Bank and grocery stores for food to provide a healthy hot meal and snack bags for around 90 hungry folks every month. I've met church members through Care Committee activities and helped provide meals and transportation to those who have needed it. I have helped tutor children from Hawkins Mill School where I gained a whole new respect for teachers. Meals on Wheels, Hospitality Hub, Manna House and A Room at the Inn are other examples of our church reaching out to the community at large. We have special shared traditions such as Stone Soup, Mother's Day Flower Communion and our Christmas Candlelight Service.

The Church of the River is important to me. It is important to the Memphis community that it exists as a beacon of liberal religious thought and practice. I remember a co-worker in Mississippi telling me about how she and her husband left the Baptist church to join a more "progressive" Presbyterian church where they were interviewed and quizzed by the elders of the church before they were approved to join the congregation. I was taken aback.

We offer support, friendship, a meaningful worship experience, community outreach, a chance for personal and spiritual growth and so much more. We are a diverse group. I have used one of Burton's favorite quotes by Francis David so many times, especially this election season: "We need not think alike to love alike." The world needs more of this way of thinking and I ask you to support this amazing church.

Ron Peck

How a Physicist Led Me Back to Religion

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Ron Peck and I've been a member of First Unitarian Church for almost four years. Today I'd like to share with the congregation and our guests why I've chosen this place as my spiritual home.

Before I get to my testimony, I have two confessions to make.

Confession #1: After listening and watching Rev. Posa and our former minister Rev. Carley give sermons from this raised pulpit, I've always wondered what's it like to stand up here and address the congregation. Now I get to find out.

Confession #2: I really like looking out from high places, so this fact will hopefully keep me calm for the duration of this talk.

My testimony will be presented in three parts. Part One I'll refer to as my "origin" story or how I discovered this church and eventually became a member. In Part Two, I'll briefly discuss why I've come to embrace Unitarian Universalism as my religion of choice. Finally, I'll share some thoughts on what makes Church of the River such a special place to worship and foster my sense of community.

So what brought me here? To answer this question, let me refer back to an event I attended in March 1993. The Memphis Public Library hosted Massachusetts Institute of Technology physics professor and novelist Alan Lightman to read from, and sign, his recently published book, *Einstein's Dreams*. Dr. Lightman's presentation made for a great evening.

Now flash forward to November 2012. I'm browsing through the pages of the *Commercial Appeal*, when I see an announcement of a lecture to be presented by Dr. Lightman at First Unitarian Church. The lecture is entitled, "The Physicist As Humanist: Science, Art and Religion". Because science and religion are two of my favorite topics, naturally I showed up. While Professor Lightman gave an exceptional talk that Friday night, Burton Carley's opening remarks really caught my attention. He stated that Unitarian Universalists hold equal regard for science, reason and faith. My reaction was, "What kind of religion is this?"

I returned to Church of the River to investigate a worship service. That first Sunday visit, just before Thanksgiving, drew me in. A beautiful sanctuary and spectacular view of nature through these windows. Stimulating sermon. A welcoming attitude among the congregation. All the ingredients were there.

Over the next five months, I kept attending. Each visit just confirmed the realization that I already possessed Unitarian inclinations. The only missing piece involved finding a home with like-minded spiritual seekers. My realization became official when I signed the membership book on April 14th, 2013.

That's my origin story. Next, why does being a UU appeal to me? Based on a recent conversation I held with another church member, we both concluded that it required a certain courageousness to practice our faith. Being a UU demands that each of us decides for ourselves what we believe and why we hold that specific belief. Moreover, some of my theological conclusions will not completely match up with yours. That's perfectly O.K. While such an approach may seem unsettling and chaotic in the eyes of other denominations, from my viewpoint, this method of cultivating a spiritual outlook is both liberating and filled with unexpected insights and surprises. Another way I embrace being a UU involves a willingness of our faith to open up the pulpit to individuals from different

faiths, and traditions - in addition to skeptics and non-believers. Lastly, I've come to understand the positive expansive scope of our faith - it seeks new ways to express what is sacred and transcendent about being alive in the "here and now". The Unitarian Universalist minister Theodore Parker expresses this idea beautifully in the following words:

"Be ours a religion which, like
sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space
its shrine, the good heart
its creed, all truth
its rituals, works of love
its profession of faith, divine living."

After sharing that lofty quotation, let me talk about my personal motivations for returning to Church of the River Sunday after Sunday. I'll touch on four reasons in reverse order.

Reason #4: I love the sense of community this church offers its members. I'll assign extra bonus points for our congregation's great sense of humor and willingness to have fun. If you attended the Cajun Music and Dinner fund-raiser back in June, I think it's safe to say the band, "Marcella and Her Lovers" brought down the house that night.

Reason #3: Although I enjoy all the church's annual celebrations - like Flower Communion Day and the Christmas Candlelight Service - I confess that my favorite is "Kite Day" to announce the arrival of spring. It's the one day that I get to be a seven-year-old kid again.

Reason #2: I can always rely on superb, uplifting musical performances by Music Director Chuck Schulz, pianist Debbie Heath and our "Awesome Little Choir".

And Reason #1: Church of the River is a wonderful place to extend my spiritual life and practice out into the world. Our worship service is a wedding of the mind and heart.

I'll close my presentation by returning to that November evening in 2012 - when I first walked through the doors of this sanctuary to hear Dr. Lightman's talk. One of the take-aways I received from his lecture is that mysteries and miracles exist all around us. For me, biblical references to "burning bushes" and earthly visitation by "angels" aren't necessary to believe in miracles. When I look out at this congregation - from this pulpit - the one miracle I do believe in is all of you. Thank you for welcoming and accepting me into the fellowship of this church.

Barbara Kuhn

Why We Come To Church

I've lived in Memphis since 1982 but I had never belonged to a church until I joined this church 3 years ago. I made a decision to find a faith community, and Church of the River was supposed to be my first stop on a tour of several churches. It only took one service to realize I was home.

I wanted to share a story that I think it demonstrates exactly why "we bother" to come to church. I volunteer off and on as a dog walker with the Humane Society of Memphis and Shelby County. So naturally this story starts with a dog, a shar-pei mix named Biscuit, a veteran of many fights, who had been abandoned was living on the streets around Covington Pike. A woman spotted Biscuit hanging about near a car wash on Covington Pike about a year and a half ago. She was going to take it and help it, but a man stopped her and said the dog was his. This was Joseph (not his real name), a homeless man who lived behind the car wash. He had taken Biscuit under his wing some time earlier and was feeding him whenever he could. The woman's sister-in-law and her brother began helping Joseph, leaving money on account for him to buy food at a nearby fast food restaurant. They gave him a phone number he could call if he needed help.

Joseph is a veteran who wound up homeless after being shot during a holdup. During the long convalescence he lost his leg, job, his insurance and his home. He wasn't comfortable living with his sister, so he took up residence behind the car wash and subsisted doing odd jobs. He was unable to resume his career as a farrier – someone who shoes horses for a living.

One night, Joseph heard a car squeal up to the car wash, a dog barking and then a splash, followed by a dog crying.

A female German Shepherd mix who had recently had puppies had been thrown in to a six-foot-deep oil pit behind the car wash. Joseph hollered to some people nearby but they didn't respond. He could see that the dog was getting weighted down by the oil, and was afraid it wouldn't last long if he didn't do something, so he jumped into the pit with her, prosthetic leg and all.

He managed to get the dog, which later was named Ellie Mae, out of the pit, and called the woman who had befriended him. She and her husband rushed over there, and she took Ellie Mae to the vet, and her husband took Joseph to help him get cleaned up.

Ellie Mae wound up at the Humane Society of Memphis and Shelby County, which is where I met her. The dog walkers there set up a fund to make sure Joseph always had food for Biscuit, something the woman, Nancy, had been doing at her own expense. Nancy took Biscuit to the vet to make sure she had her shots. Biscuit turned out to be heart-worm positive, and the dog walkers fund paid for treatment and also to get him neutered. The Humane Society loaned Joseph a crate to keep Biscuit in during his treatment, because Joseph didn't want to be separated from his four-legged friend.

Nancy's husband took Joseph to get him signed up for Social Security benefits, and they bought him a tent to put up at his spot behind the car wash.

Joseph fell on hard times not long after that when he was mugged again, and his prosthetic leg was damaged to the point that it was unusable. The Humane Society dog walkers helped again, finding him some crutches and someone had a connection that enabled him to get a new prosthesis.

In the meantime, Joseph's sister convinced him to move into a workshop behind her home, which he did. Biscuit survived his heartworm treatment and stayed w/Joseph.

As for Ellie Mae, her family came forward, and after some discussion, they surrendered her and her litter of puppies to the Humane Society. They all have good homes now.

A few months went by before anybody heard from Joseph again. He called his contact at the humane society just to say hello and thank you.

He's still living in the workshop behind his sister's home, and his new leg has given him the mobility that he needs to work, so he's been busy doing odd jobs as a handyman, and he's been eating well enough that he has gained 30 pounds. He is also trying to get his farrier business restarted.

His pal Biscuit is also thriving, and is his constant companion. He's trained the dog to open doors for him by flipping the latch with its nose, and Biscuit will go and sit wherever Joseph tells him to.

When he doesn't have any work, he still likes to go to his old spot by the car wash.

The folks at the Humane Society asked if he needed anything, as the fund that had been started for him and Biscuit still had some cash in it, and he said no, he just wanted to say hello and to thank everyone again for all they had done.

He also said that he has found homes for five dogs he found living on the street.

Even though Joseph's story doesn't have anything to do with Church of the River, I have no doubt in my mind that, with all the lives that this church has touched, it and its family have played a role in many similar stories.

And those people have likely gone on like Joseph, and done what they can to help others, too.

And that is why we bother.

Rachell Anderson

My name is Rachell Anderson, I'm a Church Lady.

Not the kind with the big hats and gloved hands who is ready to enforce the mores of the church but one who believes that I should develop and use my God-Given talents to make this world a better place.

I became a Unitarian Universalist in the 1960s after a very long search. I was married to a man who was a minister in the Lutheran Church of America and I think it's safe to say that he left the ministry when he no longer believed what he was preaching. I, too, who grew up in, but had abandoned the Black Baptist Church, held many doubts about the role religion (as I knew it) could play in my life.

With those issues flowering our path, we visited the UU Church in Rockford and knew, immediately, we had found our church home.

I guess I am still a newbie at the Church of the river. I moved back to Tunica County after 50 years of living and working in Northern states. For nearly 40 years, I was a member of the Abraham Lincoln Unitarian Universalist Congregation which I watched move from an old ragged two-story building to rented space to a lovely designed edifice in the middle of the corn field in Springfield, Illinois.

In that congregation, I served in nearly every possible capacity. I did everything that needed to be done: religious education, salad luncheons, singing in the choir, developing and delivering sermons, even mopping floors and cleaning bathroom. At one point, I was observed on the roof with the guys, repairing storm damage. You see, I'm a Church Lady.

We raised our 3 children in the UU Church. They are fine people. They reminded me last week of how much they learned about themselves in the Our Whole Lives sexuality education curriculum. Now I am giving my niece and nephew the same heads-up on one of life's most confusing issues.

As a newbie at COR and a new retiree, I was looking for a place to fit in and to help out. Because of what's happening at COR I have taken opportunities for ministry, both inside and outside the walls of the church. Because of the work of fellow congregation member Dr. David Jennings, for the past 3 years I donated clinical hours to the Church Health Center. This is an amazing place that provides Medical and Psychological Services to people who have jobs but no insurance.

I find that helping others helps me to improve my own sense of well-being.

At the Church of the River and in the Alliance group in particular, I have found people who "get" me. My interests in the environment, social justice, personal responsibility and writing are supported and encouraged.

At COR, I have found people with the energy, vision and intellect to help me continue to grow.

It is for these reasons; the Giving and the Getting, I am a CHURCH Lady. I will give my time, talents, and money to make this church a better place.

I hope you are inspired to do the same.

Robert W. Wallace

My wife Lana and I have been members of the Church of the River for just three years, but this congregation has had a much longer and larger impact on our lives than that short time span would suggest. In fact, one could argue that we are UU's today because of the existence of this congregation. Here's the story.

I don't recall the exact date or even the year; it was sometime in the late 1970's or early 80's. I had recently finished graduate school and had landed a research position at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Our department was in the basement of the old central building that has now been torn down and replaced with the new entrance-way and patient clinics. A group of the younger staff and graduate students would gather there daily in the conference room during the lunch hour, where we munched our sandwiches and engaged in free-wheeling conversations about the goings on around town, dissected department politics, and poked fun at each other and of course at our more senior colleagues who were not there.

I sometimes joined the group, and on one of those days the conversation somehow turned to religion and to local churches. A young graduate student by the name of Lisa Jennings was also sitting at the table that day. I don't remember all that she said, but I do vividly recall her saying that she and her husband David, who was then a medical student at UT, attended the First Unitarian Church of the River, and that it was a place to go to hear interesting philosophical discussions.

Although I didn't say anything, Lisa's comment immediately grabbed my attention. I had grown up here in Memphis deeply immersed in the Church of Christ. I went to high school at Harding Academy, a Church of Christ school, and then four years to their Harding College for undergraduate study. Based on this experience, the last thing I would associate with church would be interesting philosophical discussions.

By the time I finished my undergraduate schooling, I had begun to move away from the theology of my upbringing. At the time I heard Lisa's intriguing comment about the Church of the River, I had not been involved with church for years, and would have likely described myself as an agnostic, hostile to the idea of involvement with any religious group.

Despite my intrigue at Lisa's brief comment, Lana and I did nothing to investigate further until some fifteen years later, in the early 1990's. At that time, work had taken us to Vero Beach, Florida. We knew no one in the local area except work colleagues, and we were looking for community. By then I had mellowed some and done some reading about Unitarian Universalism, which I found intriguing. So, Lana and I looked up the address of the local UU's and did a drive by. What we found was an office in a storefront located in a rather run-down area of downtown Vero Beach; it was not an inspiring beginning.

But at about the same time, Lana was taking a course at the local community college, where she met another student with whom she enjoyed talking, and whom, by the end of the day, she had invited over to our house for dinner later that week. That evening, Lana told me about the encounter and the dinner invitation, but knowing my anti-church bias, warned that her new friend's husband was a minister. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" I said as I envisioned an evening being proselytized by a local fundamentalist minister.

Well, as you can probably guess, it turned out he was the minister of the local UU Church. We had an absolutely wonderful evening together, and over time, we all became good friends. Soon we were attending and then members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Vero Beach, which at that time was meeting in a local elementary-school cafeteria. There we met warm, friendly and interesting people, and I was delighted that I fit right in with my many doubts about the theology from my early roots.

Since then, as we have lived in different places we have always searched out the local UU churches and they have always become the fundamental basis of our community. When we made the decision to return to Memphis upon our retirement, one of the things that intrigued me was the possibility of re-exploring Memphis as part of a very different religious group than the one with which I grew up. I have not been disappointed.

What a joy it was when we finally visited the Church of the River, and I discovered Lisa out front of the church that Sunday greeting visitors, more than 30 years since that lunch table discussion were I first heard about Unitarian Universalism. Everything about the service—the setting, the warm welcome from the congregation, Burton's sense of presence and his message from the pulpit, and of course the music from the choir—was beautiful. So much so that Lana commented as we drove home that "The service was like a gift wrapped up in a beautiful ribbon."

Lana and I have found this to be a very special place. As Lisa noted more than thirty years ago it is a place to hear and discuss interesting philosophy. It's also a place to find warm, interesting people and a place where we've made some very good friends. It's a place for inspiration, enlightenment, happiness, and a place for sadness at times of loss; it's a place to hear and to make beautiful music, and most important, and as Burton often reminds us, it's a place where we can grow our souls.

So, first of all, I encourage you to talk about our church community; you never know when someone who is sitting quietly might be listening closely.

Second, this amazing church is a place that deserves and needs our generous financial support. I urge you to be as generous as possible. One of the wonderful things about this church community

is that we are all in it together, and together this can continue to be a very special, even an amazing place.

Sandy Kozik

Why The Church of the River is Important to Me

Hi my name is Sandy and I'm a Unitarian. I am also a teaching artist, a Christmas designer, a sometimes actor, and a retired circus clown and I love a good metaphor.

When I worked for a traveling tented circus, my mentor was the ringmaster and former clown Jimmy James. He was very tall and very wide--portly is the word he liked. One day I was telling him about how mad I was that someone had come up to me on the circus lot and given me a religious tract and when I tried to return it because I said I just didn't believe I was going to the hell described for various reasons listed in the tract, we had an argument. Jimmy told me what he always tells the tract hander-outers and the like.

He takes the person's hand and holds it and says he's glad they are happy doing what they are doing, but that he feels as strongly as they do about his spiritual belief. And that it is actually a very personal thing to him, much like keeping one's bible in the drawer of the bedside table. It's personal and he knows it's there when he needs it and cherishes those special moments when he opens that very personal drawer. The person is usually left speechless, giving one time to walk away while they ponder that moment and perhaps question a different way of believing.

Growing up, my parents took me to many different churches so see what we could see and I mainly remembered the smells of clean St. John's Episcopal, the incense of several Catholic churches, and the sometimes scary images in the stained glass and sculptures.

For the child who decided the Santa Claus story might just be a bit far-fetched at four years old, but who none-the-less LOVES the idea of Santa and trees and Christmas spirit, I guess I just feel that religion or spirituality doesn't need scary images and guilt and maybe should make sense for modern times.

So why this church? Well, back in the late 50's early 60's, my mom heard artist and church member Burton Callicott speak about his beliefs of the hereafter and how bodies didn't rise up from caskets out of the ground and stuff. It was more like the energy from us turns into some sort of a light force. She imagined it to be like a space full of different beams of beautiful light, all different colors and intensities that could pulse, glow, get stronger and communicate with one another. Notice on your way out how Mr. Callicott used light in that painting that hangs in the back of the sanctuary.

So this made my mom start taking me to the First Unitarian Church—which was then on Bellevue across from Central High School—because it suddenly seemed to make sense that one could be in a church where people could have different visions of what it all means and not chastise one another for thinking differently. Apparently, Mr. Callicott was able to open his bedside table drawer, too, and share.

This church allows me the freedom to QUESTION. In my work in non-profit arts education, I love the aesthetic education process developed by Maxine Green and the Lincoln Center Institute.

- Noticing Deeply: To identify and articulate layers of detail in a work of art through continuous interaction with it over time.
- Embodying: To experience a work of art through your senses, as well as emotionally, and also to physically represent that experience.
- Questioning: To ask questions throughout your explorations that further your own learning; to ask the question, "What if?"
- Making Connections: To connect what you notice and the patterns you see to your prior knowledge and experiences, as well as to others' knowledge and experiences...
- Identifying Patterns: To find relationships among the details you notice, group them, and recognize patterns.
- Exhibiting Empathy: To respect the diverse perspectives of others in our community, to understand the experiences of others emotionally as well as in thought.
- Living With Ambiguity: There does not have to be a yes or no answer for everything. Sometimes you just have to wait and see.
- Creating Meaning: To create your own interpretations based on the previous capacities, see these in the light of others in the community, create a synthesis, and express it in your own voice.
- Taking Action: To act on the synthesis of what you have learned in your explorations through a specific project. This includes projects in the arts, as well as in other realms...
- Reflecting/Assessing: To look back on your learning, continually assess what you have learned, assess/identify what challenges remain, and assess/identify what further learning needs to happen. This occurs not only at the end of a learning experience but is part of what happens throughout that experience. It is also not the end of your learning; it is part of beginning to learn something else.

Imagine my fear as a teacher in our Sunday School, when we were requested to us the actual "BIBLE STORIES" one year. It was actually enlightening—the lesson plans were not that different from our other Tapestry of Faith lesson plans. There is a story, a pondering/questioning discussion time, and art activity or exploration to help us embody the story more personally.

So when we did Noah's ark, the lady turning into salt, and others that I have a hard time imagining why intelligent grown-ups believe word for word.... well, the students helped me (often in their own disbelief) reflect on the metaphors involved. And your kids still do that for me on a weekly basis.

So my final metaphor is this this: while listening to TED TALKS on NPR recently, they had several scholarly grown-ups talking about time and existence and where it all started, etcetera. One person said that our world or solar system is like a roll of toilet paper. If we were to roll it out all the way from end to end as a reference of time... then take the last little sheet and measure just a few centimeters of it.... that is how long we have been here. Which made me once again ponder how other grown-ups can be so adamant about one book and believe everything in it literally, word for word, and not question just because that's the way they have always done it?

Why is the Church of the River important to me?

Because it's like practicing yoga, or exercising one's brain, or why I believe in the aesthetics of Apple products as opposed to something cheaper, or just sitting quietly getting to look out the sanctuary windows and feeling accepted. It's the freedom of religion that happens here, and the capacities of learning that can be practiced at each one's own pace without fear of ridicule.

As a child, whenever they passed the little offering bags, I always put at least a quarter in, even though I didn't have much money, but I figured it would help pay for a brick or something. So, on

that note, let's pitch in what we can so that we can continue this journey together. I'm closing my drawer now. Thanks for listening.

Rick Crenshaw

Why I Support the Church of the River

My name is Rick Crenshaw. My wife Susan and I came to this church 23 years ago. I want to tell you why the Church of the River is important to me and why I think it is important that we support this church.

I was born into a happy, middle-class, very large, very Catholic family. If you saw the movie "My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding", you'll understand what I mean by family. Five siblings, twenty-seven first cousins along with all the aunts, uncles, and then on to the second cousins and all my parents best friends and their kids! We were all very close. Growing up, I was immersed in Catholicism. I went to Catholic elementary and high schools. There was daily mass at school where I was an altar boy. With the exception of the kids in my neighborhood, everyone I knew and loved was Catholic... and they all seemed very happy.

I loved being part of my Catholic community. It provided friends, fellowship, boy scouts, holiday gatherings with all the cousins and with it laughter and joy. I loved the pageantry of the high mass, the candles, the stories of the saints, the music, the passion, and the mystic nature and the magic of it all. A big part of that love for Catholicism was my mother, Frances. There are people who, not so kiddingly, called her St. Frances. She was the embodiment of what I thought unwavering faith in God and Jesus could provide.

Only that didn't happen for me. I 'got' the "love your neighbor" part, but much of what I was taught didn't seem reasonable or possible to my young mind. One day after mass, I had a brief discussion with my teacher, a nun, about purgatory and the concept of 'indulgence' (seems someone had calculated the exact number of years for which you get credit from purgatory for saying certain prayers.) It was then realized I could not believe what I was being told. By the age of 11, I was a doubting Thomas. I could not accept that faith which gave my mother such serenity and goodness. I didn't understand what was wrong with me. I considered myself good. I knew I was. Why didn't I 'get it'? It gnawed at me. Was I blind? Was I ignorant? I kept my mouth shut. And so it went through high school. My friends laid claim to personal and emotional experiences of faith. And I... I attended daily religion class and several retreats... all along hoping I would 'receive the 'Holy Spirit'... or ... something.

Sure enough, in my junior year of high school I had my revelation - it was this.... that I must finally accept what I had been fighting all along - my own reason and judgment. And that was it. There I was at age 17, alone, as I came to this realization. At least, I knew of no others. It was the secret I had been harboring since the age of 11 come to the surface.

No longer a doubter - I was a non-believer. I had to inform my parents. My mother was crushed. Word got out. I was the first of my family in my generation to publicly reject the family religion. Like that family in the movie, you are family forever. But you can imagine the trauma I caused. Embarrassment, disappointment, and shame for my parents... disapproval from so many others. It was as if I had contracted a virus. Something my aunts, uncles, and parents' friends didn't want

their kids to catch. But the choice was to live with a lie and be in, or live honestly and be out. I was now out - relegated to the sidelines. I lived that way - from age 17 to age 33 - outside looking in on a community that meant so much to me as a child. I was angry to be put in that position. As immature as it was, that anger kept me out of any church except for weddings and funerals for years.

When Susan and I had children, she began to talk of the need for a church we could join. I refused to listen. She began to ask me - what spiritual experiences will we give our children, where will they marry, who will speak at our funerals, and so on. I saw the sense in it and agreed to a search for a spiritual landing place but worried what compromise I would have to make to do so. I remembered reading in the newspaper a story of how this 'Church of the River place' embraced Peter Barrosse, the first publicly acknowledged person to have acquired AIDS in Memphis at a time other churches were fearful, and worse, condemning. Here, I thought, is a church that I might be willing to join. So one Sunday, with Susan, I made the first visit to a church service in a very long time.

I was a little anxious as I sat in the pew that Sunday morning and stared out the window at the magnificent view. I was surprised to find the first song was exalting, of all things, rational thought!! Next, I heard in the announcements, 'Welcome! We are a non-creedal church' (as someone weaned on the Apostles' Creed you can imagine the relief I felt) and then, 'we need not think alike to love alike'. The sermon asked questions rather than explain what I should think. I was sold. First visit. Within a few weeks Susan and I joined the church. I recall being sorry that I had waited all those years.

So... Why is the Church of the River important to me? Why do I support it?

Because when I was young and angry, I thought I could live my spiritual life without reference to others. I didn't need people telling me what to believe. But what I found out that Sunday 23 years ago is that no one is an island unto themselves. I realized I need this church. I need it because it welcomes those who examine and question faith in the search for truth, and because here we are asked questions that call upon us to work toward our own understanding of right living and action.

And, I believe, you need it, too. I think 'we' need it together. We need this church to help pull ourselves out of the daily grind, and as a community recognize our relationship to others beyond the business of acquiring our daily bread and shelter. We need that fellowship in the spiritual without being held hostage to doctrine and dogma.

Our children need it, too. They need a community who values them and where they learn to value others. Where they are empowered to reason and think, and seek the truth for themselves.

So, yes, I need this church. I've made my best friends here. But beyond that, the greater Memphis community needs this church - this refuge for the beleaguered and harassed - this welcoming home for the seekers - this light in the deep woods for those like me - this launching pad for doers to take action - Memphis needs this community - for all those to find, as I did. A place for everyone willing to love alike, even if we do not think alike.