

“Together—one of the most inspiring words in the English language. Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”

These immortal words, attributed to celebrated American author and Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, were published in 1922 in a popularly circulated book of inspirational quotes, only about 10 years before this sanctuary was built on the corner of Pacific and Bristol and became the church that it is today. I wonder sometimes, especially when I walk in the doors of this church and look up at the sanctuary—which was amazing built during the height of the Great Depression—if any of the original forbearers that were part of the Unitarian community that had been in Stockton since 1892 had those words in the back of their minds as they took the bold step in constructing this hallowed place that would go on to mean so much to so many people.

We have never been individuals in this sacred space, but we are all interconnected threads that form the rich tapestry of that Stockton Unitarian community that began 132 years ago—so far removed from the denomination’s New England origins. We are the inheritors—and many of us are the keepers and creators—of a legacy of resilience, compassion, and spiritual exploration. Although we have been in existence for many years, our history is not merely a chronicle of passing years; it is a narrative of shared hopes, collective dreams, and the embodiment of our UU values and principles put into action in our neighbourhoods to help positively impact the greater world in which we inhabit. Through decades, our church has weathered storms and periods of uncertainty and celebrated our triumphs in grand style. We have been a beacon of inclusivity, a sanctuary for those seeking spiritual nourishment and fulfilment, and a source of inspiration for

social justice endeavours. We have been built by—and will only continue to be sustained by—countless hands, hearts, and minds working in unison, fuelled by a shared commitment to love, justice, and the inherent worth of every soul.

Our spiritual journey as a congregation is not a static one; it is an ever-evolving narrative. Now, as we find ourselves at the start of a new calendar year and at the unfolding of chapters yet to be written, the call for active participation echoes louder than ever. There have been many wonderful souls who have undertaken responsibilities and dedicated their time and talents to nurture the growth of the church; many have become the lifeblood that have done things for many years and generations. The programs and events that they have organised have been pivotal in fostering a sense of community and extending a warm embrace to all who may seek refuge within these walls. The question is: who will be the weavers among us that will help us weave the next threads of our communal story?

Consider the image of a vibrant garden (I know that there are many gardeners among us—a skill that your minister was absolutely not blessed with): the committees of this church are the gardeners; the ones who are tending the soil, planting the seeds of ideas that will blossom into future harvests, and ensuring that the roots of our community are firmly grounded. Volunteering for church programs is akin to the blossoming flowers—each program is a unique bloom that contributes to the overall beauty and diversity of our spiritual landscape. Attendance at church events is the shared sunlight that nurtures our collective growth, providing the energy needed for our community to thrive. And the visitors and newcomers that we are looking to attract are the ones that we are hoping will walk through our garden and enjoy the beauty on display; hopefully, they will also be

inspired to stay and help tend the soil and plant new seeds and bulbs of their own that will blossom and join in the beauty of our garden scape.

As we contemplate the legacy of our church—and what it will be in this new year—we recognise that its strength lies in the grand achievements, but also in the small, everyday acts of kindness, dedication, and mutual support. It is why the words of Edward Everett Hale are so evocative to me. Too often we think that anything that we do toward serving the church has to be a large commitment that requires nothing short of completely sacrificing our lives to the detriment of everything else in our life. This is because we are intimidated by the example of those selfless volunteers that have spearheaded one particular ministry or program for the better part of 20 or 30 years; we feel like we can never measure up or step into their shoes to do the job as well as they can. But it is important to remember that we are not being asked to single handedly reinvent the wheel. We are simply being asked to step up and offer what we can to help to continue to keep things going. Success can only be achieved if we agree and consent to work together.

Moreover, active participation is a testament to the commitment to our future as a congregation. The torchbearers of this legacy are not only those who have established this church—nor are they the ones who have simply done the same work for years—but also those who choose to carry it forward. By joining committees, it allows us to have a voice in shaping the trajectory of our community. By volunteering for church programs, it allows us to invest in the spiritual nourishment of present and future generations. By attending church events, it allows us to affirm our shared commitment to a future where our church continues as a beacon of love, acceptance, enlightenment, and positive social change.

In our shared journey, let us acknowledge the challenges that may arise when it comes to active participation. The demands of life, personal responsibilities, and the ebb and flow of time can create hurdles. However, it is precisely during these moments that our dedication to each other and the legacy of this church becomes the most crucial. Not only do we have everything at our disposal to have a future where our church is a wellspring of inspiration, a refuge for seekers, and a force for positive change in Stockton and beyond—where our committees are vibrant, thriving hubs of creativity and innovation—but we have everything that we need to help make them a reality in the here and now.

To realise this vision of the church that we want, let us recognise that each one of us—every soul that is present—has the ability and possesses a unique key toward unlocking the full potential of our community. Your skills, talents, and passions are more than just personal attributes; they are valuable resources that can contribute to the flourishing of our church. Joining a committee might be the channel through which your insights shape the decisions that guide us. Volunteering for a church program could be the conduit for your creativity to manifest in ways that uplift and inspire. Attending church events may be the spark that ignites connections, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

As we navigate the challenges and joys of the present, let us be mindful of the lasting impact our actions can have on the future. Our legacy is not a static relic of the past but a living, breathing narrative that unfolds with each choice that we make today. My hope is that you will join me, beloved community, in embracing the call to active participation within our congregation—not only as a continuation of this great legacy that began over

90+ years ago, but excitedly leaping forward into the future success of this church of which I have no doubt in my mind that we can realise.

In closing, I leave you with more immortal and inspirational words from American author and Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one

But still I am one.

I cannot do everything

But still I can do something

And because I cannot do everything

I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

May the spirit of unity, compassion, and purpose guide us as we continue to shape the unfolding story of our church.

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste.  
Thank you all so much.