

## *The State of the Church*

*A Worship Service by the Rev. JEFF BRIERE  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga  
January 13, 2008*

*HYMN 346, Come Sing a Song with Me*

**Jeff.** Good morning. Welcome to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Chattanooga. My name is Jeff Briere; I'm the minister of this congregation. Let's begin our service with a folk song, or at least it sounds more like a folk song than a hymn. This is number 346 in your hymnal. Number 346.

*ANNOUNCEMENTS & GREETINGS*

**Roger.** Good morning, my name is Roger Davis and I am President of the congregation. If you would like a bulletin printed in a larger typeface, please let the usher know. Our worship service will begin shortly, but first, here are a few announcements: Our religious education program is led by Jamie Sullivan and she could use your help. Please see Jamie or me and we'll tell you how you can make a difference. After the service today, please join us for a time of fellowship and conversation. Fellowship events are organized by Adam Couch and he could use your help afterwards to clean and straighten up the place.

The men's group meets tomorrow evening and Diane Davison is leading a creative cards workshop here at the church. The choir rehearses Wednesday night—that's a change for 2008—the book club meets Thursday night and Wednesday Night Out is at Leslie Walters' favorite Mexican restaurant, *La Altona*, corner of Main & Broad.

We understand that some people are downstairs when this brief summary of activities is announced. A complete listing of announcements is included with your program and is available on our web site. If you'd like to receive weekly announcements via e-mail, please see Chris in the office. I invite you now to extend a hand of warmth to two or three people near you. And make a special effort to find someone you don't know and make that person feel welcome. So please rise now and greet your neighbors. [*Meet & Greet*]

[*Chime*] Thanks so much for joining us in worship today. We hope you find the service rewarding and that you leave here inspired and uplifted. Please note the emergency exit over here to my right; now is the time to put your cell phone in "Worship Mode;" childcare for the young and the restless is available downstairs in the nursery, and the arm chairs here in the Sanctuary are for those who need a little support when standing. If you have a particular joy or sorrow or something you'd like added to the prayer of the people, please clearly write it on an index card and drop it in the basket back there. You may sign it or not, as you wish.

Marcia brought us a Beethoven sonata this morning, one from his early period, about 1798.

*PRELUDE: Allegro*

*KINDLING THE CHALICE*

In the light of truth and the warmth of love, we gather to seek, to sustain, and to share.

*STORY: Eight Cardinal Virtues*

Who knows about George Washington Carver?

Anyone?

Any adults?

Here are some pictures of him.

George Washington Carver was a black man born in 1864, and that meant he was a slave. Do you know what that meant?

He was owned by another person  
Worked for him all the time—no holidays, no summer vacation

The Civil War made it possible for GWC to go to school

He went to elementary school, high school and three different colleges. He studied agriculture and botany and became a well-known expert in the uses of peanuts, sweet potatoes and beans.

He thought of many ways that people could use peanuts, such as glue, axle grease, bleach, buttermilk, chili sauce, charcoal briquettes, ink, instant coffee, linoleum, mayonnaise, meat tenderizer, metal polish, paper, plastic, pavement, shaving cream, shoe polish, synthetic rubber, talcum powder and wood stain.

Can you imagine all that made from peanuts?

To tell you the truth, most of his ideas didn't quite work out the way he thought they would. People preferred chili sauce and coffee to be made from chili peppers and coffee beans, not peanuts.

GWC had some good ideas for his students, though. You see, after college, he became a teacher and he loved his students very much. He wanted them to grow up to be good people. He made up a list of eight cardinal virtues for his students.

“Eight cardinal virtues” means eight very important things or good

habits that you should try to do or be. I'd like to share them with you, because I think they make a whole lot of sense.

- Be clean both inside and out. Treat your body well in the way you care for it and with what you eat
- Neither look up to the rich or down on the poor. People are people, whatever their station in life.
- Lose, if need be, without squealing. Don't complain. Today you lose, tomorrow you win.
- Win without bragging. You are a winner. So is everyone else.
- Be considerate of everyone, especially children and elders. Really said this about women, children and elders, but today, we understand that we should treat everyone with respect, not only women.
- Be too brave to lie. When you lie, you are afraid of something or someone. You are better than that. Stand up and tell the truth.
- Be too generous to cheat. No sense in cheating, because it only makes the game easier for you, which means it was too hard for you in the first place. Nothing is too hard for you. Keep trying.
- Take your share of the world and let others take theirs. There's plenty to go around.

*OFFERTORY: Andante*

GWC had three patents on his work, but never made a great deal of

money from them. He was paid very well, considering he was a black man in a time of racial segregation and Jim Crow laws. He saved most of the money he made.

And in 1939, he donated it to a foundation that would help people learn better farming techniques. We'll collect the morning offering now, for the support and ministry of this church. As always, the Dolores Wood–Louis Wilhoit Memorial Food Bank is happy to accept your donations of non–perishable food and household items, and the collection basket for that is by the front door. And thank you very much for your generosity.

If you wish to light a candle of joy or sorrow, you may step up here and Mary will assist you.

*HYMN OF THANKSGIVING*

Spirit of life and love, we are profoundly thankful for the blessings we experience everyday. Would that we recognize what is truly valuable to us every day and be thankful for it. Kate, please lead us in our hymn of thanksgiving. The words are in your program.

Oh, we give thanks for this precious day,  
For those gathered here and those far away,  
For this time we share with love and care,  
Oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

*PRAYER OF THE PEOPLE*

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

John Spehar had two valves replaced in his heart last week. He is doing well, home and recuperating now. A card or letter would be appreciated.

Someone who could use a comforting word and some consolation right now is Elaine Watkins. She came home Saturday to find her house burglarized.

Kate's mother, Charlotte Elmer, has a serious infection and it has entered her spine, an area that is beyond the reach of her physicians. She has entered hospice, and is being treated for pain, but nothing else, as is her wish. This is grim news for our family, so I hope you keep us in your prayers and indulge us if we seem distracted. Your kind expressions of concern are appreciated.

*[Reading from the cards]*

Today our prayers go out to all in this room. May their joys increase for them and for us and may their sorrows be borne by everyone, for we are surely all in this together.

There is a name. A name of someone alive or dead; someone who is suffering, someone who is elated; someone in need of payer or someone with whom you celebrate. At this time, say the name aloud and let it reverberate in this sanctuary, where it will land on the ears of your friends and neighbors.

*[Names]*

*Dona Nobis Pacem.* Give Us Peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem.* In these moments of silence, let us hold close to our hearts all those who rejoice today and all those who suffer today in this world.

We will hold you until you soften.  
We will love you until you begin to melt.  
We will sing to you until you remember peace.

READING

This story comes from the Hasidic culture of eastern Europe.

Rabbi Yerachmiel of Parsischa fell dangerously ill. All the inhabitants of the town prayed for his recovery; but their prayers were not answered, and the illness grew worse.

A traveler arrived at the town. He went to an inn, and asked for a drink of brandy. Some local people overheard his request, and said that drinking alcohol was prohibited. They hoped that this would persuade God to answer their prayers.

The traveler went to the synagogue, and in a loud voice he prayed: “O God, cure the rabbi quickly, so that I can have a drink of brandy.” At that moment the rabbi began to recover; and by the following day he was out of danger.

Rabbi Yerachmiel heard about the traveler’s prayer, and said: “The prayer of the traveler was more acceptable to God than the prayers of the townspeople. This was because he was honest with God about his desires.”

*HYMN 298, Wake Now My Senses*

*SERMON: The State of the Church*

A few years ago, as I watched President Bush deliver his State of the Union address to Congress, I thought I should do that, too. And thus began a tradition of sermons that I call “The State of the Church.” Please understand, this won’t be anything as grandiose as a State of the Union Address. It’s more like a snapshot of our church at this time. And like any snapshot, it will not capture everything; there may be something just out of the picture, so after I finish, if you wish to add something that I neglected to mention, you may do so.

I’ll begin with what I think is probably *the* success story of this church since I arrived here five years ago. Religious Education and the presence of children. If you recall the movie, *Field of Dreams*, you’ll recall the voice that Kevin Costner heard in his head. “Build it and they will come.” Using that as a motto, Dolores Wood, Maddie Kertay, Amy Ziegler, and now Jamie Sullivan have built the religious education program to be something desirable, something that children *want* to attend.

I’ll never forget the day Amy—or maybe it was Maddie—told me a story about a youngster who enjoyed her time in the RE program so much that she nagged her parents into coming to church. Now *that* is something. I am very pleased to see the progress the program has made, because children represent our future—not as members of this church, for they will likely move away when they mature—but for their parents, who will become members.

We say it every Sunday, but it bears repeating. The RE program needs volunteers to carry out its work. Please see Jamie or Nicole Barnhart and tell them you’d like to help.

Membership, headed by Elaine Hill, is doing a great job of tracking visitors and getting them into our database. A few days after visitors come to our church, I call them to thank them for visiting and answer questions they have. It’s been a great way to know how we are doing at greeting visitors and for developing new members. Every visitor has told me that you are a welcoming and gracious bunch of people, and that’s good to hear. Bill Berry is the one person most visitors meet. Some visitors return, others don’t, and I think that has more to do with what they are seeking than how they are greeted here.

Wendy Sapp is re-vamping the new member folder with current material and it will be ready when we welcome new members on February 17<sup>th</sup>. The committee is planning a cookout or picnic or some event outdoors in May to welcome new members. One thing we should strive to do better is incorporating new members into the

life of the church. It's not enough to be welcoming and inviting. Once a person joins this church we ought to be alert for ways in which he or she can participate in the activities we sponsor. In plain terms, this means invite a new member to Wednesday Night Out, or to the Men's group, or to Twisted Knitters or some other activity.

Our stewardship is in good shape, I think. Last year, we had a successful campaign and that was due to a positive attitude, appropriate training, hard work, and a half-decent economy. We can never predict the economy, but we still have all the other factors going for us.

Tapping Leslie Walters' organizational skills, this year will be slightly different, because of Celebration Sunday. This is a fund-raising procedure used by many churches and the Stewardship Committee thought it would be a way to inject new life into the routine of pledging and budgeting. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, we hope you will make your pledge of support for next year while you are here at the church. By that time, we will have already pledged the members of the board and several other members—a total of about two dozen.

Actually, Daidee and I pledged the Standridge's yesterday, before income tax season swamped Lynna Ruth, and it was a very successful visit. So we have one pledge in already.

On March 16<sup>th</sup>, Celebration Sunday, we hope to gather sixty more pledge cards from members and friends which will leave us about thirty or so to collect later. Having the bulk of our pledges come in on one day will reduce the load on the stewards and the committee.

And we'll have a little fun in the process, because Celebration Sunday will be a celebration, for sure. The minister will uncork a whiz-bang service, the choir will prepare special music, the church will be specially decorated and we will enjoy a catered brunch. That's right. It's a potluck Sunday, but you don't have to bring anything. If you cannot make it to church on that Sunday, we hope

you will attend the Celebration Reception the night before.

On Saturday, March 15<sup>th</sup>, in lieu of a Fellowship Dinner, we invite you to attend a gala reception from 6 to 8 pm. The affair will feature an elegant ambiance, many delicious and never-before-seen-in-Chattanooga hors d'oeuvres from Fresh Market, a special delivery from Atlanta of freshly-squeezed Two-Buck-Chuck, live music and a rousing program honoring the community we have in this church.

Perhaps you can see that this might be a more desirable method to raise our operating budget than a month of telephone tag to arrange pledge visits. I feel that anything we can do to dispel the culture of scarcity, the feeling of being a step-child and a down-at-heel attitude, the better for all of us. This church makes me feel good and I want everyone to feel that way. Even around fund raising, we should feel good. And so we'll make it a Celebration Sunday.

The administration of this church is in great hands as always. Would someone please go get Chris and bring her in here for a moment? I have often said that a minister, especially a new minister whose strengths are not in administration, could not have a better and more able administrator than Chris Tregaskis. She's not perfect, and neither are we. But she gets closer to it than anyone else I know. I am not sure how she could improve her performance. The staff gets paid on time, items that need attention are brought to the person involved, bills are paid, and she is a joy to work with.

Communication in a church can be difficult, especially when the church is growing from a family model to a pastoral model, as this one is. Two recent incidents exposed our need to improve our methods of letting people know what is happening. In early December, several members decided to construct a labyrinth here in the sanctuary for the winter solstice. At that point we had already missed the deadline for the newsletter, so all we had left to publicize this event was e-mail, the bulletin, the website and word-of-mouth.

One of these people, whose name begins with Jeff and ends with Briere, missed two e-mail opportunities to publicize it. You can guess what happened. Not too many people showed up for a very nice event. Live and learn.

The other incident happened soon after. Several members realized late in December that they had not publicized the New Year's Eve Party in the newsletter. At that point, all they had was the bulletin and word-of-mouth to get the news out. It was a good party, but could have been better with better publicity and forethought.

And that's a big key to the success of any event here in this church. We have five ways to publicize events—Sunday announcements, the Sunday bulletin, the website, the newsletter and word-of-mouth. People tell me no one reads and they want to make announcements. Other people tell me no one listens and they want to use e-mail or the bulletin for publicity. It's a wonder that any news gets out. I encourage you to think ahead and use all these media to announce your activity. More than that, I encourage you to read the e-mail blast and to listen to the announcement summary.

The ministry of this church could improve in outreach. The interfaith worship service for International AIDS Day was a good service, and I hope the combined choir can do something else like that in the future. But attendance was not what we hoped it would be and we can attribute that to the lack of publicity in the other churches.

This church could also improve greatly its activities to establish social justice. There is no better way to say that, so I'll repeat: This church could also improve greatly its activities to establish social justice. Making the world a better place is one of the reasons we are here, and doing it together—as a congregation—will strengthen the bonds among us and strengthen the health of the church.

The 12-step group, which rented a room from us for their meetings

has dwindled in membership and cannot continue meeting here. They found another place to meet and so it would behoove us to find other ways to serve the needs of the community.

We continue to host homeless families within the Interfaith Homeless Network, and Charlotte Davis now leads that effort after three good years of hard work by Marge Pasch. Thank you, Marge. For the IHN week, we now expect some joint participation with people from Pilgrim Church, because that church has ceased their participation.

For pastoral care, I think we are in good shape. When we know of people's needs. I sense that we reach out and offer assistance or just our caring presence. The Caring Committee is active and ministers to people with cards and calls, Christmas cookies, prepared meals, and hospital visits.

The *nUUsletter* is put together by Wendy Sapp and she does an outstanding job. I was the editor for a couple years and I am now very glad it's in her capable hands. We would like to have more photographs in it, so can I have a photographer, please? Anyone? Bring your camera to church when you come and take some photos. If they are electronic, send them to me or Wendy.

Uncle Paul has been busy recently with several projects:

- Our air conditioner was stolen, and will be replaced before it becomes too hot around here.
- With Ron Pasch's help, several leaks in the roof were plugged.
- Photos of all the past ministers of this church now hang above the sound booth so that they can supervise the sound technician.
- The defibrillator is also hanging now in the sound booth. I

suggest that you stop by and take a look at it, although Mark Simpson, who donated it, says that it's too simple to operate incorrectly.

- Ron weather-proofed the sign on Navajo and it will be lighted soon.
- The poles are up already for bright lights to illuminate the parking lots for night time events and to discourage those paramours who rendezvous in the lower lot.
- Sometime this year, we intend to install ceiling fans in the sanctuary to distribute the warm air that concentrates near the ceiling and keep us cooler in the summer.
- The playground has new chips and no poison ivy, and rain-water now drains away from it, all thanks to JR Nolan.

The church recently received a sizable gift and the donor asked that it be spent on hardware, that is, on something durable, not on insurance nor the electricity bill. After some thought and debate, the board of trustees voted this week to purchase a projector and remote-controlled screen and a laptop computer for the sanctuary.

Such a system could be used to show movies of a spiritual nature or movies that do not enjoy a wide distribution but still have some redeeming quality which demands an audience. For instance, *An Inconvenient Truth* was available to us before it was shown in commercial movie houses in town. There are many others like that. Children's movies was another obvious use. It could also be used in worship and for teleconferences.

The music ministry of this church is great, and I don't say that just because I am married to the music director. The choir is invigorated and their singing is strong—even I am singing better—as long as I stand next to Carl Hansen. Our biggest challenge seems to be

landing on a night to rehearse when everyone can be here. We have recruited guest musicians for our worship services and concerts. George Olin and his friends plan a concert here in February. Like the RE program, we are building the music ministry and we expect they will come.

The Sunday morning forum may be the longest-running program in the church. It continues right along with outside speakers and interesting topics.

The nursery has enjoyed stability in care for a longer time than any since I've been here. I am very grateful to Kay McCurdy for the devotion and commitment she shows for the children in her care. Please give her a big hug when you see her and tell her how much it means to have good child care in the church.

Adult religious education has been somewhat sketchy in recent years. But this year we have three offerings. In the fall, Dez Papendorp led "Spirit of Life," a nine-session spirituality course; in March, Daidee Springer and Steve Hollingsworth will be the tag-team leaders of "UU 101" and in April, Leslie Walters, Inga Johannsen and Karen Kimbell will lead "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven," an exploration of the feminine aspect of spirituality, especially in pre-Christian times.

I should maybe let the board speak for itself, but I see them as working together very harmoniously and getting things done in a timely manner. With our new scheme of having a president-elect and a past president sitting in on the meetings, it's clear that a smooth transition to new leadership will happen in July.

I will address our culture of worship next week.

I believe we all should thank Nancy Anderson, Carol Hobbs and Pat O'Brien for great Art on the Walls. The quilts were especially lovely and now we have these dramatic prints of African Americans

to adorn the sanctuary.

The endowment & the financial health of this congregation is pretty good—we have no outrageous debt, we pay our bills and we put aside as much as possible for a rainy day. One thing that really pleases me is that we do not raid the endowment or other funds to pay our bills. Short-sighted churches do that every day. We must thank David Reed, George Helton, Buck O’Rear and especially Daidee Springer for their work to insure our financial stability.

On the downside, or the slightly tilted side, we haven’t been able to sell the cemetery plots that were donated to the church. A cemetery plot, it occurs to me, may be the most difficult thing in the world to sell. If your future needs include such a thing, please see David Reed at your convenience.

Our Green Sanctuary Committee is out of business, technically, because of the plaque above the water cooler that trumpets to the world that we are an official, certified, approved, no-doubt-about-it, 100% green sanctuary. Congratulations to Sandy Kurtz, who championed that initiative. Sandy, Roger Davis and others continue to be involved in green activities, like Tennessee Interfaith Power and Light.

I notice an uptick in fellowship events and activities around the church. One of the most pleasant is Diane Davison’s creative cards workshop. Another is Twisted Knitters. The book club continues, but maybe with reduced participation. I mentioned the solstice labyrinth and the New Year’s Eve party already. Potlucks, every other month on the third Sunday, are always popular. Wednesday Night Out turned into Wednesday Night In on the first Wednesday of the month this year. Everything I hear about this event tells me that it’s very popular.

Two events I’d like to specifically mention are the retreat and the coffee house. Adam Couch is organizing a church-wide retreat for

us on the weekend of April 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> at Fall Creek Falls State Park. I have not been in on the planning for this event, but I am excited about the return of the retreat. If you have ideas for short programs or activities for the retreat, I encourage you to see any member of the board of trustees.

The other event, new this year, is a coffee house. Kate tossed this idea to the choir and they ran with it. It happens on a very special day: February 29<sup>th</sup>, Leap Day. It will be right here in the sanctuary, and will feature side-splitting comedy, impertinent impressions of the minster and selected members of the Board of Trustees, home-made music, poetry, coffee, desserts and who-knows-what-else. Maybe red checked table cloths and a recitation of the Gettysburg Address. The over-arching theme of the evening is love—in all its wonderful manifestations. And it’s Sadie Hawkins Day, so watch out.

Carl Hansen is leading the charge on this, so if you’d like to be a part of history, see him soon. I know two people who have already cancelled their plans to attend the symphony in order to be right here on Leap Day. It ought to be fun.

The minister of this church sometimes feels worn-out and irrelevant. At other times, ebullient and ready to tackle the world. I don’t want to say he’s feeling old, but he might feel a little tired now and then. This may not be new to you, but for me, it’s something I have not before encountered.

The minister is a pretty good preacher, but he realizes that his sermons need to go deeper into the human condition and the mysteries of life. This is not easy, for he is an experiential guy, not a research nerd. I believe his pastoral care is decent.

One thing he is not is an administrator. I suppose I could go to a seminar or workshop to learn the one hundred most useful administrative procedures, but still I’d feel like a Budweiser

Clydesdale at the Kentucky Derby. There are some things I am just not suited for.

Lastly, I'd like to address leadership and volunteers. As Les Kertay can tell you, it is difficult to recruit people to serve as an officer of the church or to work on a committee. When no one volunteers, one of two things happen: The minister does it, because he thinks it's critical; or it doesn't get done, critical or not. And when the minister does too much, he catches hell from the Music Director, from Leslie Walters, Dez Papendorp and the Church Administrator. And Daidee, who really lets him have it with both barrels.

So more often than not, it doesn't get done, to the detriment of the church. Once in a while, some guilt-ridden person, like Maddie Kertay, adds it to the thousand-and-one tasks she already has on her to-do list. And that is detrimental to her health and family life.

I see our leaders working too much and too often for the church. They cannot do it all and always. So I implore you to say, "Yes" when someone asks you to serve. You can always ask for help.

Well, that's the state of the church as I see it—my snapshot of life at this church at the beginning of 2008. I may have overlooked something, so if you know of some aspect of church life that should be noted, please tell us about it and use this microphone over here.

Overall, I'd give us about 88 out of a hundred. Not an A, but a high B. Making this church live and breathe as a church ought to be constant work. We cannot coast, and we must be honest with each other and with ourselves.

In the Hasidic story we heard earlier, the prayer of the traveler was more acceptable to God than the prayers of the townspeople because the traveler was honest with God about his desires. I think that sentiment applies to our church as well as the traveler. If we are honest with ourselves about what we want our church to be, that

church will happen.

*HYMN 94, What Is this Life?*

*POSTLUDE: Scherzo*