



From the May 2011 of *The Spire*

From Whom All Blessings Flow

Generosity: The Sure Sign of a Vital Congregation

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In a trend that has continued in our nation for the past twenty years, five Christian churches close their doors forever each day. There have been many studies done to understand the reasons for this sad trend at the same time that some churches are able to buck the trend and to flourish...sometimes in the very same community in which neighboring churches are closing. One discovery that has emerged from these studies is that the most essential indicator of church health is neither the amount of the budget, the number of members, nor the size of the physical plant. What matters most to the future of a church is *congregational vitality*. There are tiny family-size churches that are vital and have a bright future while there are once-grand churches that have resigned themselves to playing out the clock in a downward spiral characterized by doing less and less each year.

The difference is *congregational vitality* and this, in turn, is measured not by absolute numbers of church membership but in what attitudes they hold, and how they translate what they believe into what they do. Regardless of size, all vital churches share the attitude of focusing on the positive rather than the negative. Another characteristic of all vital congregations is that they *invariably* make visitors feel welcome. This is not the product of any sort of welcoming "gimmick." Rather, the welcoming attitude is inevitable reflection of the joy and enthusiasm that current members feel about congregational life.

And all vital congregations – 100% of them – are characterized by *generosity*. Vitality and generosity are inseparable. The

reason for this is simple. In vital congregations, people experience the love of God and simply cannot help but to translate the love they receive from God into the love they share with others.

First Congregational United Church of Christ is a vital congregation by all measures of congregational vitality. With the triumphant music of Easter still ringing in our ears, I want to share with you some separate examples of generosity that, when taken together, form a compelling picture of a vital and generous congregation.

In March, our 2011 Stuff-the-Bus event surpassed all of our previous efforts by collecting an amazing 260 bags of groceries. Our church's spirit of generosity in organizing this event was contagious as several of our tenants and space users contributed many bags of groceries to the collection. *Our* generosity inspired *other people* to be generous. There is no greater sign of a church's vitality than that our love-translated-into-action is so strong and so obvious that it inspires others beyond the immediate church family. By modeling Christ-inspired generosity we inspired our neighbors to acts of kindness. Could there be a better example of genuine evangelism or clear proof of church vitality?

During the month of April, there were three separate opportunities to reflect our church's vitality and generosity. On April 10 we stood proudly with hundreds of other congregations by receiving the One Great Hour of Sharing offering that "makes the love of Christ real for individuals and communities around the world who suffer the effects of disaster, conflict, or severe

economic hardship.” Our congregation’s contribution of \$600 will go to help people in need in more than 100 countries.

Our Lenten mission project teaches our children and youth how to translate Christian values into everyday actions. Throughout Lent, our young people used a calendar with daily questions to help them understand how they are blessed by God and encouraging them to help others. This project included collecting coins that, at the end of Lent, we contribute to Heifer International to help third-world families become economically self-sufficient. As our young people contributed their own allowance and spending money it taught the Lenten concept of *sacrifice* — dedicating something that we value to a purpose that is *sacred*. The project also paired children with adults from the congregation to teach by example that generosity is for everybody — not just young, not just old, not just our own families — but that generosity is a value shared by our entire congregation. This year our children, youth, and their adult sponsors collected well over \$400. This amount will be matched by a Heifer challenge grant to make an effective contribution of just shy of \$900. Could there be a more tangible reflection of the vitality of our church and its ministries than to see the nine children and youth of our congregation having this much long-term and significant impact on the lives of people around the world?

All vital churches have a deep commitment to Christian education for children, youth, adults, and even the community beyond our front doors. This is at the very heart of our understanding of why we exist as a church and what God is calling us to do. We decided to dedicate this year’s special Easter offering to ensure the continuation of a vital Christian Education ministry in our church. While contributions are still being received, we have already received over \$1600 from members and from friends, both near and far.

Sometimes we get so busy with our church activities that we can lose site of the “big picture” of just how generous and how vital we are. So with Stuff-the-Bus, One Great Hour of Sharing, Fill-the-Ark, and our Easter offering still fresh in our minds; let us take a moment to celebrate our generosity and celebrate our vitality. In the past few weeks we have collected over \$2200 in special offerings as well as 260 bags of groceries. We’ve taught our children and youth lifelong lessons about generosity and we’ve inspired our neighbors by our own actions.

We are, truly, a generous congregation. We are, truly, a vital congregation. So as we celebrate these accomplishments let us also keep in mind the source of our own generosity and vitality, by recalling the words of our doxology — Praise God from whom *all* blessings flow.