

Report to the Parish

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Pittsfield, MA

1908<sup>1</sup>

During the past year or more we have been trying to meet a situation which has existed in our church. It has taxed your ingenuity, and has at times, I feel sure, been the cause of thoughts of discouragement. We have come, I am sure, to that point where we have crossed the brook down in the valley, and can begin our climb up the hillside, where the air is less discouraging, and the view more inspiring.

Apparently you have been doing your work in obscurity, with little to show for it. But as a matter of fact you have been doing it in the open. Your pluck and your courage has been observed. The Christian church is face to face with a great problem. You have heard of it so often that it has become commonplace to you. In this church you have always maintained certain ideals which have been dear to you. This has been done at no little sacrifice to you. You have always maintained that the church should stand not only for moral integrity and spiritual power in the community, but should move towards the realization of those ideals in the common life. In your allegiance to these ideals is your strength. This church has never been without ideals.

But you have always have had such hard work to keep yourselves prepared to do your work with these ideals, that at times you have been well-nigh discouraged. So completely have you been occupied with the task of earning of the daily bread of the church that you have never had a free opportunity of showing what you can do with your ideals. A month ago it seemed to many of you that you would be compelled to give up your magnificent work just at the time when you should most zealously push it. But you were not the only ones who thought that you were doing a work that is worthwhile. It happens that four of the largest and

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the third bound collection that includes sermons from 1908, along with a couple of reports, such as this one. So, while not explicitly dated, it is very likely from 1908.

most efficient Unitarian churches in our country think that you should have the opportunity of showing what you may do with a free hand. They have very generously offered to place at your disposal enough money so that you may be able to work with a free hand during the next year.

Now this one thing must be understood. When we accept this money, we do so knowing full well that it is not given to us as charity, in the use of which we may enjoy our church services and have our bills paid by others. Let it be clearly understood that this money is given to us that we may use it in making a distinct contribution to the religious life of this community. While it was distinctly said that Unity church is to have the money without any restrictions being placed upon it, we must realize that we have no right to touch a single cent of it, unless we are willing to accept the full moral responsibility involved.

In accepting this money we are freed from the burden with which you have become acquainted by your experience, but we are placed under a great responsibility. I wish to state to you as briefly as possible what that responsibility is. For many years now there has been going on in our very midst some great and revolutionizing movements. Our ideals as well as our ideas have been slowly and steadily changing. Among other things, we are coming to have an entirely different idea of the church and its relation to the life of the individual and the community. To one who reads the religious papers of the various denominations, the evidences of this transition are most apparent. On all sides we hear of the indifference of the people to the church. Especially is the cry that no young men are going into the ministry. The ranks of the ministry are being depleted. There is a lack of scholarship, moral vigor, and spiritual power among the ministers. Some of the denominations are even going so far as to raise endowments for the support of theological students. Thus they would virtually attempt to buy men to become ministers. All of this is but an indication of the general feeling of many towards the church. I am not expressing myself too strongly when I say that many regard the church as simply an institution which has been bought up by people of wealth and culture to become a servile priesthood to minister to their selfish wants. I am not sure that this is true, but it is true that there are many evidences that point in that direction. Such, I say, is the attitude toward the church.

It is strange too that this attitude seems to be gaining strength just at a time when the whole country is alive with a great moral awakening, such as is stirring to its very foundations our whole national life.

This great movement is searching to the very roots of the churches' foundation, and asking for its credentials. The men who have come to the support of this church believe that this church in Pittsfield, which you have nurtured and cherished, is, by virtue of its history and its ideals, in a position of making a great contribution to the solution of the problem of which I have spoken above. Because they think that you are able to do something here, they have sent you a token of your faith.

This suggests the task that is before us. It is not a question of the establishment of a sectarian church as distinct from the so-called orthodox churches. That is no longer a vital problem. Here and there are to be found those who cling tenaciously to those old forms of expressing great truths. But for the most part those teachings are no more. The task before us is one of interpreting to the world the moral and spiritual meaning of human life, of upbuilding here in this city a free and mystic church which shall minister to the deepest needs and satisfy the soul in its hunger and thirst for the truth of the Living God.

We are concerned with the same task as the early Christian church, as the church of the Protestant reformation, as the church of the Puritans. I am not extravagant in my statements. We are dealing with the great principles of spiritual freedom and the worth of the human soul and human life.

Somehow the whole nature of our work seems to me to have changed. I feel very keenly that we have before us a profoundly serious task. It will not be easy. It will require hard work, and persistent work. So far as my own connection with what you will do, I wish to say this, that I beg of you to hold me up to the most strict and rigid demands. Do not let me run free and easy. I want to do the most that I can, and make to your common work the best contribution that it is possible for me to make.

On the other hand, I shall assume that you too wish to make just as great a contribution as you can. Inasmuch as we are dealing with great fundamental principles of human life, I shall

not hesitate to ask you to make sacrifices for this work. I know that you will be glad to make them. But one thing we must have clearly in our minds. During the next twelve months we are going to do the most effective work that we have ever done, and we are going to succeed.

Now I want to come down to one or two practical considerations. There are three things that we must do now. There are many others that I have in mind to do a little later.

Aside from the fact that we have been given, or are to be given, a sum of money with which to do our work, one other man, who is deeply interested in the church, and the task before us, said that he would like to see the church raise \$150.00 more than it is now raising. He will contribute to this amount. We can do this, and I told the man that I was certain that we would. That is the first thing that I would like to see done. I suggest that you appoint a committee to do this. If it is not presuming, I would like to ask you to appoint me on this committee.<sup>2</sup>

II--In the second place, I am going to ask you to assist in a direction that is still rather presuming on my part. That is in the matter of church attendance. I know of no other way in which you can do so much as in this way. Will you not resolve in your own minds that you will make this your contribution to the year's work that is before us? The reasons for this request are evident. In the service of a principle, let it become a duty.

III--I am somewhat surprised to think of myself making this request, but still I see the absolute necessity of it. Will you not make every effort to ask others to come to church. I do not suggest that you ask those who have church homes already to come here, but there are plenty of people who have no fixed church homes. Ask them to come, and make them feel the need of coming. See if you cannot increase the average attendance by making an effort to bring others with you.

IV--Lastly, if you know of anyone to whom we may send literature, will you kindly send the names to me. Or anyone upon whom I may call, will you send their address. I have been sadly

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<sup>2</sup> In hand-writing here is the phrase, "Action of the Parish Committee."

remiss in this kind of work, but it has been more from the force of circumstances, than from choice. I shall soon be free to give my entire time to the work of the church, and as I said before, hold me up to a high standard.

At the meeting of the Unity Club recently, it was decided to do some publishing and advertising in the interests of the work. Will you not advise the Parish Committee that as soon as the finances warrant, they expend some money in this way.