To the Beloved Community,

When the overcrowded Unitarian Church went looking for a new place to locate in the 1960s, it was out of options. The church leaders had already tried purchasing auxiliary buildings, they had seated people in an audio-only basement, and they still needed room. The leadership of Revs. Dillworth Lupton and Gene Pickett had created a unique place in Richmond. A place where reason and freedom mattered. A place where openheartedness was lived. The reputation of First Unitarian was an integrated church in segregated Richmond. It was a place of hope for so many.

The community did not like the church. The Unitarians had challenged Jim Crow, they were active in supporting sit-ins and marches, and now, they were reading feminist literature. If the Unitarians were buying, suddenly land parcels came off the market.

Lena Whitt, the chair of the Long-Range Planning Committee, was frustrated. She knew too well how crowded things had gotten and how resistant the community was to a church that wanted to welcome all. As she researched neighborhoods in Richmond, she found just one that included both black and white homeowners… the Carillon. The church planned to make an offer on a property. Word got out and the neighborhood put pressure on the owner. He declined to sell.

Disheartened but determined, Lena scoured property maps. She came up with a plan that even now sounds risky, a Unitarian act of faith. But it worked.

Whitt was one of an amazing generation of leaders at work in the church. Like others, she and her husband Asa had come to the church because they were active in civil rights. They experienced the church as a refuge from the racism that prevailed, the customs of Jim Crow, and the thinking that women were meant to throw bridge parties. Along with Paul Bailey, Lin and Gloria Byland, Norma Doss, Candy Hecht, Board President Joe Jenkins and his wife Lillian, Roger Johnson, Carl Keeling, Ruth Kelley, Norma Spencer, and others, Lena worked to find a place for a new church home.

First, she identified a location: six lots facing Byrd Park occupied by apartment buildings, which gave her hope no one would suspect the church. Without approval, without any assurance that the church would back her up, she bought a lot. Did she even tell her husband? She shared her plan with others who bought the other properties. They told no one else for fear that word would get out and the plan would fail.

After the sales were complete, they revealed the plan. The church could buy the properties at cost, or not.

There was some shock. It wasn’t the way things were done, but Lena had presented just what the congregation was seeking, accomplished by subterfuge, but accomplished, nonetheless.

The road ahead would lead them to expand the planned budget for the building three times and still persevere. These were folks of commitment and vision. The vote was “yes.” President Joe Jenkins declared that 1000 Blanton Avenue would be the new home of the Unitarian Church.
Why do I tell you this story as we begin only the third Capital Campaign in the history of this church home? It is to remind us all that we are now the generation of leaders responsible to make it happen.

It is our challenge and our joy to repair the roof and make it sound. It is our challenge to retire the debt we took on in our last renovation, which was very significant. It is our challenge to move the building toward environmental synergy, starting our journey to “net zero.” These are responsibilities that live out our values, lighten our financial load, and keep us dry as the music and the hope rises in the Great Hall.

This is our challenge. It is our time. And we need to be just as clever as Lena Whitt to make it happen.

After all, we are used to big challenges, and we have met them head-on. We have locked our doors to protect immigrants. We have rehung our torn down Black Lives Matter banners. We have repaired the windows broken by bricks thrown into our building. We have publicly demonstrated to change laws and attitudes. We are a people of faith in our commitments and in one another. We can and we will do this well.

So allow me to recruit you into a cabal of faithful folks, committed now as Lena and her colleagues were then. We’ll tend the vision and carry it in our heads and hearts. We will make sacrifices, stretch, and remember that others before us have done this. Surely it will take a Unitarian Universalist act of faith. Yet that connects us to the generations before. First Unitarian Universalist is their legacy, entrusted to us.

Let’s gather our group and do what needs doing, so that someday in the future, generations will remember us and the clever way we worked and sacrificed to make it happen, so that it could be their legacy too.

Rev. Jeanne M. Pupke
Senior Minister