My name is Karen Epps. I have been a member of Countryside since 2006, and I am currently a member of the Board of Trustees.

I have a passion for Countryside, and it is a very important part of my life. That is why I am leading the stewardship campaign this year and why I wanted to speak with you today.

My passion for Countryside lies in its people. For me, the holy is Community. I have been fortunate to develop a number of close friendships here and I am part of several formal and informal social groups. This is a place that I feel safe, secure and happy.

I am passionate about Worship at Countryside. I thrive on the monthly themes, speakers and challenges presented to me. I am comforted by the readings, meditations and presence of the holy Community sitting around me. I am moved by the voices, musical instruments and words we experience whenever we are together.

I am passionate about Study at Countryside. I’ve taken some of Rem’s Monday night classes, like to attend movies and workshops and participate in the Monday night book group. It has also been a blessing to participate in several covenant groups, Beloved Conversations, Building Your Own Theology and Wellspring over the years. My mind is significantly more open and my knowledge significantly expanded by the things I have learned and experienced here.

I am passionate about our Space. Sitting in these natural areas provides such beauty for our worship, study and social activities.

So, if I’m passionate about all these aspects of Countryside, I guess I’d better be passionate about how they happen or come to be.

When I joined Countryside, the church was in the midst of a minister change. The minister announced she was leaving literally as she was teaching our new member class. Very little was said about pledging; after all, we UUs are terrified to talk about money. We received a form, and I distinctly remember it spoke about a minimum $25 annual pledge to cover the cost of the UUA magazine. It did not include the “Aspirational Giving Guide” chart that we often refer to today. I was unchurched as an adult and my parents were very private about money; they had never shared their annual church pledge with me. I had no context for determining an appropriate amount for my pledge. When I pledged something greater than $25, I was felt pretty good about myself. I increased my pledge for a couple of years, but it was a slow climb. One day, I happened to see the amount of a pledge check belonging to a friend sitting next to me during a Sunday Service. My sense was our salaries were probably fairly similar. Our pledges were not. That was my wake up call.
At that time, I was also getting more and more involved on committees and was gaining an understanding of what it takes to operate the church. Our annual budget for fiscal year 19-20, the year we are in now, is $474,000. Pledges from members and friends comprise $397,000 or 84% of those revenue resources. Of that, $35,000 or 7% pays the mortgage and sets aside money in the Capital Reserve Fund for our beautiful space. $337,000 or 71% represents salaries and benefits for our amazing staff. That’s 78% of the budget, and we haven’t even turned the lights on yet.

In my view, our church operates pretty lean and mean. In a service organization, it is common for salaries and benefits to comprise the majority of the budget. Short of cutting staff or reducing long term maintenance of our building and property, there are not areas that can be reduced to any meaningful extent. The mission of our membership must be to increase our pledged support (or the top line) to our beloved Countryside. Taking note of the February theme of Resilience, we need to continue strengthening our church to stand firm to our values in today’s difficult winds and provide strength for those who will follow us in the future. If we were each able to increase our pledge by at least 5%, the top line of the budget would increase by nearly $20,000.

Our increased pledges are critical to maintaining a fair salary and benefits structure for our staff. Just as we expect from our own employers or our own business or from Social Security and Medicare, we owe our staff the respect of inflationary increases and health care coverage commensurate with the employment market. If we as a community aren’t able to provide this to our staff, how can we stand in protest to employers or even our own government about these same matters? I believe that supporting this goal fits perfectly in our January theme of Integrity both for the church Community as a whole and for ourselves individually.

I am challenging us all to increase our pledge by 5% or more for the 20/21 fiscal year. Some of us can do this readily. Due to limited resources or difficult circumstances, some of us will need to maintain our current pledge level or, perhaps, ask for a waiver this upcoming year. We must all evaluate our own resources of time, talent, and treasure.

Though my resources have not changed this year, the decision I’ve reached is to increase my pledge by letting go of a regular personal service. I am going to shift the dollars I currently spend on that service each month to my passion for Countryside. However, fair warning, in the summer, when you see my feet in sandals that look like this, we will all share in the pain of my decision.

In closing, I ask all of you to support Countryside’s 2020 Stewardship Campaign, *Pledging with Vision*. We open the campaign today and would like to have your annual pledge information by Sunday, February 16. As you enter Atherton Hall for fellowship after the service, please pick up your Stewardship envelope. You will find them in alphabetical order.

I am grateful for all of you and to all of you for listening to my words today.