

2023-2024 Touchstones Annual Theme: Reimagining the Common Good

The “letter” of the common good includes fundamental rights and freedoms; cultural institutions; highways, streets, and sidewalks; a transportation system; fire, police, and public safety; sanitation; a judicial system; an electoral system; national defense; public education; a safe and ample food supply; clean water and air; parks; and natural resources. These are some of the nuts and bolts of civic/civil society and a robust and effective democracy.

But there is also the “spirit” of the common good, which presupposes every person’s inherent worth and dignity and seeks justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Most social problems are tied to how well or poorly the elements supporting the common good work. And those elements go far beyond government to include non-profits, businesses, labor unions, social justice organizations, community groups, neighbors, and more. Some people benefit far more from the common good than others, as homelessness, poverty, racism, gun violence, and more attest.

Reimagining the common good requires looking at society and ourselves because the common good is always in competition with individual needs and interests. Building support for the common good in a “me” culture is challenging. It requires a balancing act between what we hold and value in common, and the forces of need and greed.

In this overall consideration of the common good, we must also attend to the commons, which is defined as “the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable Earth.” Said differently, our embrace of the common good must expand to include the planet Earth.

Why does this annual theme matter? Lisa Sharon Harper presents a poignant articulation of why the common good is so important. She writes, “In light of death, [and] life …the common good can feel lofty, insignificant, extra-curricular, or like the self-indulgent rhetoric of the political class. …As I held my newborn niece, Dove, it hit me: …I was seeing the common good …as a laundry list of political issues we should care about.... But the common good is not only about politics. The common good is about life and how we live it. It is ultimately about how we are all connected. It is about how our love or lack of love affects our families, our neighbors, our communities, our cities, our nation, and our world. …The common good is about personal brokenness …reconciliation. …truth telling. …The common good is about generosity and humility and ultimately it is about love. Are we cultivating generosity? Are we cultivating humility? Are we cultivating the kind of love … that flowed from the good Samaritan? …As much as I love my niece, I love the *quartet of the vulnerable*, as Nicholas Wolterstorff calls them: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, and the poor through my public voice, my taxes, and my vote. In a democracy, we are all profoundly connected.”

As described below, the exploration of each monthly theme proceeds on two levels: the essence and importance of the theme and its connection to informing, reimagining, supporting, and advancing the common good.

Please note that seven of the themes below are values from Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant.

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Month	Theme	Brief Description	Principle	Sources
September	Beauty	<p>Beauty is an intrinsic good that enhances our well-being. It is a relationship between our senses and reality that soothes, elevates, and charms. Our enculturation, however, can restrict our ability to see beauty in other cultures and expressions.</p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Albert Camus valued beauty but was also aware of those humiliated by society. By choosing, as he said, to be faithful to both, he advocated justice and beauty as elements of the common good.</p>	P & T	1

Month	Theme	Brief Description	Principle	Sources
October	Love <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p><i>Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Love is a foundation of the common good. The parable of the Good Samaritan emphasizes the necessity of loving your neighbor as yourself. The Golden Rule's reciprocity can unleash the power of love in service of the common good.</p>	2 & 3	1, 2 & 4
November	Interdependence <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p><i>Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Caring for the Earth to address the harm we have caused is crucial to the common good. As Wendell Berry wrote, “To cherish what remains of the Earth and to foster its renewal is our only legitimate hope of survival.”</p>	6 & 7	2 & 6
December	Pluralism <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p><i>Pluralism. We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology.</i></p> <p><i>We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Our ability to work across differences with love, curiosity, and respect is necessary for the common good to be nurtured, expanded, and defended.</p>	1 & 4	3 & 5
January	Justice <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p><i>Justice. We work to be diverse, multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations and society at large.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> The 8th principle embodies King's Dream of justice as well as his advocacy for Beloved Community with an explicit call to action rather than an implicit one. Its focus on racism and other oppressions are necessary to overcome narrow concepts of the common good. The Beloved Community is the highest expression of the common good.</p>	2, 5 & 6	2 & 5
February	Hope	<p>Despite adversity, hope is a life orientation that believes we can prevail. Hope is a shapeshifter that adapts in the face of reality to “encourage” us, which means “to put heart into.”</p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> The common good hangs in the balance in the struggle between hope and fear. Hope undergirds what William James called a “civic temper,” which helps us transcend the drive for individual survival to focus on the common good and create a shared meaningful existence.</p>	1 to 7 & G	1

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March	Transformation <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p>Transformation. <i>We adapt to the changing world.</i></p> <p><i>We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Lynn Ashbeck asks, “How do we get from transactions to transformation? From authority to power? From self-interest to the common good? And how is it that ...we often seem to mistake one for the other?” Incremental increases of the common good is a pacifier when transformation is what is needed.</p>	3	1 & 6
April	Generosity <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p>Generosity. <i>We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.</i></p> <p><i>We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Generosity is essential to increasing the common good, given how so much good currently accrues to so few. Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert famously asked, “How much do we deserve?” There are too many who deserve more, but their needs can only be addressed through a reimagining of the common good.</p>	7	1 & 4
May	Equity <i>From Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant</i>	<p>Equity. <i>We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.</i></p> <p><i>We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.</i></p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> What does flourishing mean when there is so much inequity? Equity connects back to both generosity and justice. Morally, the common good does not ask, “What is owed?” but “What is right?” The latter addresses visible and invisible inequity.</p>	1 & 2	3
June	Humility	<p>Humility, one of seven medieval virtues, has fallen in stature; now considered a weakness rather than a strength. Yet such a view gets humility entirely wrong. As A. R. Bernard wrote, “Humility is not weakness, but strength under control.” To cultivate humility is to be an architect of compassion. True humility is spiritual maturity.</p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> We should not assume we know what constitutes the common good from a position of privilege and power. Humility encourages us to dialogue with those receiving less good to pursue a holistic view of the “common” good.</p>	1 to 7 & I	1 & 5
July	Faith	<p>Wilfred Cantwell Smith asserted that faith is an orientation to the self, neighbor, and the universe, a quality of human living. Belief is content; faith is a process that influences how we live and make life with meaning possible. For Smith, belief is a noun, faith a verb.</p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Support for and cultivation of the common good is an exercise in faith that goodwill can be a bridge that reaches across much that divides us.</p>	3	1 to 6

Month	Theme	Brief Description	Principle	Sources
August	Wisdom	<p>Unitarian Universalism is a wisdom tradition that supports our pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is less about accumulation and more about how the quest for wisdom changes us. It can involve reason, intuition, creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective, and more.</p> <p><u>Annual theme connection:</u> Wisdom helps us imagine common and uncommon goods and encourages us to bring them into being.</p>	4	1 to 6