

STEWARDSHIP SERMON AWARD WINNER | 2015



# What If

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Nearly 20 years ago, Emir Greene was murdered in the East Germantown section of Philadelphia. Emir was just 20 years old and, as you would imagine, his murder shattered the life of his mother, Victoria Greene. Mrs. Greene has described what it's like to have a son who is murdered. "You can't sleep, you can't eat, you think you're going crazy. You think you're seeing your son walking up and down the street. You are hyper-vigilant. You are on guard all the time. You don't trust anyone."

Mrs. Greene is a social worker by training, and within five years of her son's death, she founded the EMIR Healing Center. "EMIR" is the name of her dead son, and in the case of this organization it stands for "Every Murder is Real." EMIR's mission is to serve and support families and friends whose lives have been affected by homicide. Volunteers and staff at EMIR provide grief counseling, and help "guide survivors through the many feelings they will experiences and the legal ramifications that are inevitable." As its website says, "EMIR offers concrete, practical, and compassionate steps towards healing."<sup>1</sup>

Every Wednesday, Victoria Greene and the staff at EMIR receive an email from the Philadelphia police department listing homicide victims from all over the city. The staff then reaches out to all the next of kin, offering their services, which have grown to include not just trauma counseling, but legal assistance in trial preparation, in-court advocacy, funeral service referrals, conflict resolution, and even nutritional advice and food support. Families in search of therapy show up for grief counseling at the Center and receive ongoing trauma support, sometimes for years following the murder of a loved one. It's impossible to know how many people have been served by EMIR, but it numbers in the hundreds and perhaps the thousands.

Jim Gramling was a Municipal Court judge in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As a judge, day in and day out, he witnessed the devastating effect that crime had on families. But he noticed something of a recurring theme in his courtroom. Every day, men and women appeared before him, brought in on warrants for unpaid traffic tickets, for failure to pay child support, and other non-violent offenses that required payment of fines to the court. State law required him to suspend the driver's licenses for these offenses, sometimes for as long as two years. And it dawned on him that a first-offense driving under the influence conviction was punished with only a nine-month suspension, and committing a hit-and-run only required a suspension of a year. Why were the penalties for these non-driving infractions so high?

Jim began to dig into the impacts of these suspensions and realized that they created a vortex of poverty. Most of those who had lost their licenses because of unpaid traffic tickets or

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.emirphilly.org>



similar offenses were people of color who were living on the edge. They often had to decide between paying the court-imposed fines and paying their rent or putting food on the table. Because nearly three-quarters of available jobs in the Greater Milwaukee area were located in the suburbs, Judge Gramling saw how a license suspension aggravated the situation by making it impossible for people to find and hold those jobs. He even found a situation where someone running a small office cleaning business lost everything because of a license suspension, since she couldn't drive to her customers' offices. As Jim discovered, the license suspensions were creating a vicious cycle of unemployment and poverty.

Jim decided something needed to be done. And so he gathered together friends he knew in the legal system. Lawyers, court officials, community activists. And they started the Center for Drivers License Recovery and Employability.<sup>2</sup> The Center helps people navigate the legal system and negotiate the terms by which they can pay outstanding tickets and recover their driver's licenses. Since its founding in 2007, the Center has served more than 10,000 people and helped about a third of them recover their driver's licenses. Now that he is retired from the bench, in addition to his volunteer work with the Center, Jim Gramling is lobbying to change the laws that require license suspension for nonmoving traffic violations and trying to provide for payment plans and community service as alternative sentences.

Katie Meyler had a tough life growing up in Bernardsville, New Jersey. She was raised by a single mom and was surrounded by drug abuse and addiction. She lost an uncle to heroin. Her sister overdosed twice on cocaine, but survived. She sometimes went to bed hungry, and neighbors used to leave garbage bags of clothes on their porch because they knew the family couldn't afford new ones. Through it all, Katie's church youth group was an important anchor for her. When the chance came to go on a mission trip to Haiti, she jumped at it. Something "clicked" for Katie during this trip. It opened her eyes to the world. Meeting girls her age and younger who had nothing, not even a source of clean drinking water, made Katie realize that her life was easy compared to so many others. She came home from Haiti a changed person.

After graduating high school and college, Katie hooked up with a Christian relief organization that was doing work in West Africa, where she discovered her life's calling. Living in Liberia and running an adult literacy program, she discovered an entire population of young girls, some as young as ten or eleven years old, who were selling themselves on the street because they had no food, no clean water, and no hope. When she asked these girls what they wanted more than anything in the world, they all told her the same thing: to go to school.

Katie used the little money she had to start sending a few girls to school, but her meager resources didn't go far. So she started using social media, posting pictures of the at-risk girls on Facebook, and she started receiving money from all over the globe. And that's how "More

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.wiscs.org/programs/policy\\_and\\_workforce/employability\\_center/](http://www.wiscs.org/programs/policy_and_workforce/employability_center/)

Than Me” came into being.<sup>3</sup> More Than Me started receiving donations and grants that enabled her to send more and more Liberian girls to school. The President of Liberia, sub-Saharan Africa’s first female president and a Nobel laureate, learned of Katie’s work and donated a building to More Than Me. Four years after founding the organization, the More Than Me Academy was putting nearly 300 girls from the worst slums of Liberia’s capital to school and providing them with school uniforms, medical services, and two meals a day. Through Katie’s tireless efforts and personal charisma, More Than Me began to receive international recognition and, in 2013, won a \$1 million grant from the Chase Foundation.

Then, Ebola struck. As you might remember, Liberia was at the epicenter of the Ebola epidemic. So, More Than Me’s mission shifted to respond to the tragedy. More Than Me purchased two ambulances for the community to transport suspected Ebola victims. Nursing teams funded by More Than Me made more than 2,000 home visits to at-risk families. Volunteers and staff provided food and other materials to homes around the community, and they identified and found care for nearly 150 orphaned children. The Academy became a quarantine center for orphaned children. You may already know a little bit of Katie Meyler’s story. Katie was one of the “Ebola Fighters” named as Time magazine’s “Person of the Year” last December.

These are inspiring stories, aren’t they? Stories about how one person can make a difference in the lives of so many. We hear these “feel-good” stories on the nightly news, usually at the end of the broadcast on Friday evenings. They’re offered up as something of a salve to our bruised senses after a week of horrific headlines. It’s easy to dismiss them as anomalies. As exceptions to the rule. It’s easy to say, “Good for him or her! I’m glad there are people on the planet doing good works” and to go on about our daily lives, unchanged and unchanging. But I don’t want us to do that today. Today, I want us to look closer, and to ask ourselves an open-ended question: “What if...?”

The first thing I notice about Victoria and Jim and Katie is that they are ordinary people. They’re not superheroes with superpowers. There is nothing more “special” about them than any of us here in this room this morning. What I also notice about Victoria, Jim and Katie is that they were paying attention. Close attention. They saw, felt, and heard the world crying out to them. Victoria had no choice. She experienced the devastation of murder in her own family. Jim and Katie, clearly, could have looked the other way. But they didn’t. All three of these people opened themselves up to the world and let it seep inside their souls.

What I also notice about Victoria, Jim and Katie is that they didn’t start with any grandiose visions. Victoria Greene just wanted others who were going through what she went through to get some support. Jim Gramling saw people struggling in a system he knew well.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://morethanme.org/>

Katie Meyler looked into a child's eyes and asked her what she wanted most in the world. And then, each of them simply started. They took a step down a path. They had no idea where it would lead. Maybe they could help one person, or two, or maybe a handful. There was no roadmap for them to follow, and failure was definitely an option. But that didn't stop them. Ordinary people who saw a need and decided to meet it, and who took action without knowing where it would lead. These are the traits that Victoria, Jim and Katie share.

So, let's get back to that question: "What if...?" Because that's the question we need to consider today, as we face the future of our beloved congregation. "What if...?" asks us to contemplate our potential. It asks us to consider our possibilities. "What if...?" asks us to set aside our fears and insecurities and to think big. Not grandiose, mind you. But big. Bigger than we ever have. Here are some of the "What if...?" questions we need to be asking ourselves:

- What if we paid close attention to what's happening right in front of us?
- What if we opened ourselves up to meeting others whose lives and loves aren't just like ours?
- What if we discovered that our deep passion actually meets the world's deep needs?
- What if our congregation started something without knowing where it was going to end up?
- What if we took one step down a path without having a complicated and deliberate strategic plan?
- What if we tried, and failed?
- What if we tried, again and again?
- What if Demetri, or Kellen, or Katie, or Riley, or any of our other amazing youth were to come to us and say "This is how I want to make a difference. Can the church help me?"
- What if any one of us sitting here in this room did the same?
- What if we, as a congregation, had some money set aside to help make that idea into a reality?

I can go on. What if we were to look at what we already do so well and decided to take it to a whole new level?

- What if, instead of donating one-half of our Sunday plate collections once a month, we were to give away *all* of our plate collections, *every* Sunday?
- What if, instead of offering comprehensive sexuality training to just the children in our own Religious Education program, we decided that every child in Delaware County should have the opportunity to get OWL training, and we took OWL out into our community?
- What if, instead of preparing a meal once a month for the 69<sup>th</sup> Street Shelter, we were to find an unused building and we made it into a UUCDC meal center that not only fed people, but taught them to cook healthy, nutritious, low-cost meals?

- What if, instead of hosting families for two weeks a year through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, we were to buy up vacant buildings and convert them to low cost housing?
- What if, instead of simply supporting a preschool in our building we were to build, staff and operate a private elementary school that put our Unitarian Universalist values squarely at its center?

This is what our “Five to Thrive!” campaign is all about. It’s about asking ourselves the “What if…” question. It’s about breaking out of the box that we’ve held ourselves in for too long. A box that says we can’t afford to think big and act boldly. It’s about telling ourselves a new story about ourselves, about who we want to be and what we’re capable of doing. It’s about saying that we don’t want just to survive, just scrape by as a congregation, but that we want to thrive.

Yes, it’s ambitious to ask each other to commit 5% of our annual income to our congregation. Some may think it’s even outrageous. But I ask you this: Is there anything better to be ambitious or outrageous about? I want us to be ambitious, even outrageous for love. I want us to be ambitious, even outrageous for justice. I want us to be ambitious, even outrageous for hope. I want us to be ambitious, even outrageous for those in our community who need us. I want us to be ambitious, even outrageous, for the children. For *all* of the children.

It seems like a lot to ask of us all,  
but together we’ll make it if we have the gall  
To support our staff and programs and such  
at levels they should be, which isn’t too much.

We want to extend our touch and our reach,  
and send justice warriors into the breach.  
We have mountains to climb and visions to see  
And children to care for at UUCDC!

We’re off to Great Places!  
Today is our day!  
Our mountain is waiting.  
Let’s get on our way!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is taken from the day’s reading, which was an adaptation of the Dr. Seuss book *Oh, The Places You’ll Go*, which the author of the sermon adapted for Commitment Sunday, retitling it *Oh, The Places We’ll Go*.