NOTICE

Virtual Special Congregational Meeting via Zoom
Sunday, December 13, at 12:30 p.m.

IUCC will be conducting a Special Congregational Meeting to vote on two important motions:

MOTION #1
To approve pledging assets for a loan/line of credit of up to $400,000 from the UCC Cornerstone Fund, Inc., SBA COVID-19 EIDL (Economic Injury Disaster Loan), and/or other lender, at the discretion of the Administration Board, to cover budget shortfalls and to maintain our cash + investments balance at a target of approximately $200,000, which is roughly 60 days of expenditures, excluding debt repayments, if any. This Motion to include approval of any other forgivable PPP loans that may become available through year-end 2021.

MOTION #2
To retroactively approve significant transfers from the Capital Fund Reserves for use by the general fund and the ECC to cover budget shortfalls from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic through year-end 2021 budget (as required by IUCC Policies & Procedures).

Please plan to attend!
In order for us to conduct this meeting, we need a quorum of 25% of corporate members. Note that a 2/3 vote of corporate members present is required to mortgage real property.

Questions? Please review the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) and the Materials provided by our Treasurer, which will be included as links in this week’s e-blasts.

Per our Bylaws, there will be an Informational Forum a week before the Special Congregational Meeting to answer any additional questions:

Informational Forum
Sunday, December 6, at 12:30 p.m.

Zoom log-in information for each meeting will be provided in e-blasts sent in the week preceding each meeting.
The season of Advent is a favorite of mine. If you caught my sermon on the first Sunday of Advent, you'll get a glimpse into why. Our cultural Christmas here in the United States is so saturated with the loud sounds of the season and the focus on purchasing presents, it can be hard to remember the reason we celebrate. Advent, on the other hand, is anything but loud, and its focus is not on rushing into noisy bustling stores or clicking to get the best cyber deal. Advent is quiet, contemplative, and dark. It’s not about presents; it’s about presence. Advent doesn’t pretend the world is perfect, it knows that there is real darkness in our lives - even all the lights of a Clark Griswold blazing house can’t drown out the pain of our world. And if ever there was a year we recognized the darkness, it’s this one. That’s why it’s almost unbelievable that a handful of candles can lead our way through it all.

And yet, isn’t it utterly unbelievable that a baby would become the light of the world?

We begin this month of December with a tiny flicker of hope. And against all odds, in a year that has beaten us down, caused us to lose faith in neighbor, government and much of humanity, we choose to believe that there is still hope, that Christmas will still come.

The juxtaposition of Advent and our American cultural Christmas couldn’t be more striking.

We won’t get what we’re used to, but what if we get more than we ever imagined?

What if, in the year we need it most, we get Emmanuel?

Flickers of light will lead the way, as candle after candle upon our wreath is lit. I invite you to join us each week of Advent and I hope you’ll take advantage of the opportunity to create your own Advent wreath at home by signing up with MYP for an at-home Advent workshop. I’m also thrilled that MYP will be bringing us an online pageant: A Quarantine Christmas, which will debut on the 4th Sunday of Advent during our worship service! You won’t want to miss it! And of course, I hope you’ll join us on Christmas Eve as we light the final candle on that wreath: the center Christ candle! We’re planning a socially distant outdoor Christmas Eve service (by reservation only) at 5, 6, and 7 p.m. and, of course, an online celebration at 8 and 10 p.m. We are working to ensure every guideline is met and exceeded as we prepare for a short 30 minute outside distanced service. If this is something you feel comfortable with, please make a reservation as seating is limited, and know that there is a chance even with all of our intentional prep we may have to cancel. However, fear not, for the light of Christmas will shine, and this year we need it more than ever!

I’ve always experienced God, the Creator, as the Spirit of Creativity, and this time invites us to look for creative ways to do and be church. I’m reminded that the story of Jesus’ birth was one of incredible simplicity. While Crystal Cathedral had a cast of hundreds in their famed “Glory of Christmas,” the nativity Matthew and Luke relay was that of an impoverished couple who quietly gave birth to a baby, while the rest of the world bustled about without ever noticing. May it be that in our simple celebrations of Christmas this year, our Advent preparations will offer us a new opportunity to notice light and experience it anew during this dark season of our lives.

And may you experience the greatest miracle of all: Emmanuel in this mess!

In Advent Hope, Peace, Joy and Love,

Your Pastor,

Sarah
Ministry With Young People remote programming for fall continues on the following schedule:

Sundays at 10:30 am Zoom Sunday School for K-5th grade
Sundays at 1:00 pm Zoom Youth Group for 6th - 12th grade

For more information, contact MYP Director David Perez (davidp@iucc.org).

Has the year gone by already? It’s hard to believe we’re in December. The strangeness of this year has been much-remarked, but can enough be said about how people have stepped up and made things work “nevertheless”?

My personal and professional gratitude goes to:

- Comma Group Leaders – some dozen different folks this year
- Adult Education Providers – numerous facilitators and teachers
- Women’s Ministry Book Group Conveners – two series with multiple groups
- Diversity & Inclusion Programmers – book studies and one-time forums
- Pastors Dave & Sarah and IUCC leaders for continual support

Tuesday Bible Study continues, under the well-read and jovial leadership of Ken Wyant, studying the life of King David as told in 1 & 2 Samuel – each week at 4:00 pm.

Talking About Work meets on the third Saturday at 10:30 am, convened by Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi and Sarah Wall.

In January there will be two Diversity & Inclusion Forums on Saturday morning, and my Survey of the Hebrew Scriptures will return on Wednesday evenings, continuing with the book of Joshua.

And our next guest speaker will join us virtually on March 7. Rabbi Rachel Mikva is an author and seminary professor, and her new book is about the ways Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can approach faith self-critically. Our friends from University Synagogue will join us for this event!

So let this holiday season be a time of thanks for blessings past and present, and the anticipation of more good things to come.

A few of us old guys play golf on Thursday mornings, kind of early, at Rancho San Joaquin golf course in Irvine. This is to invite any others who may be interested either in playing golf at that day and hour (and location), or thinkably at some other day / hour / location. An IUCC “Golf Team,” anybody?

If you are interested in some golfing, we can try to set it up. Just let Keith Boyum know about your interest at: keith.boyum@gmail.com. And by the way, this is not necessarily a guys only thing: coed groups would be just fine!
Advent is the season of the liturgical year dedicated to a time of expectant waiting for the birth of Jesus. This year, Advent started on November 29 and will end on December 24. The most common Advent tradition involves the lighting of four candles. As we light each one, we reflect on the past and anticipate what is to come, taking time to contemplate what the four candles traditionally represent: hope, faith, joy, and peace. We need all four more than ever before!

Of course, Advent also means Christmas is right around the corner. We’re all wondering what it will look like this year and how we’ll manage it in the midst of a pandemic. We’re all struggling with how to balance risk vs. benefit. We want to see friends and family, but we’re also mindful that we need to take special care so we can see them (and they can see us!) NEXT year too.

Your church leaders are also struggling to find that delicate balance as we consider the possibility of providing several small, masked, socially distanced, reserved seating, outdoor Christmas Eve services in addition to the online ones we’ve already got planned. We’ve agonized about it. Your physical health and safety are extremely important to us, but your mental health matters too. We are keenly aware that some of our members have suffered losses of loved ones, income, and jobs, and we hold each one in prayer for a better year ahead. We’re also very mindful of the enormous emotional toll the protracted pandemic has caused and how hard it has been to shelter at home. There are no easy answers.

We want to know what you think, so it will be helpful if you can fill out the survey we’ve provided in recent e-blasts. Of course, the issue of having any kind of in-person service may be moot if health authorities mandate another “stay at home” order in the wake of the pandemic. Keep an eye on our e-blasts and our website for updates. It’s all tentative for now.

For many of us, IUCC’s online services have been a wonderfully sustaining factor. So much thought and effort goes into making them warm, welcoming, and engaging! We have tremendously talented staff who work hard to bring us a high quality and meaningful worship experience. They have been flexible and responsive, ready and willing to put in the time and effort to keep us moving forward. The process of producing our online services is multilayered and complex, and it takes a tremendous amount of skill to produce such a professional result. I am grateful to them every Sunday when I tune into Facebook.

I’m so impressed with our vibrant, energetic new pastor who wowed us from her first day here! Pastor Sarah seems lit from within with a fire and a zeal that have livened up our worship and brought new life to our church. She is poised to lead us in ways we can only imagine.

You’ve probably noticed a big focus on church finances lately. We’ve just wrapped up our stewardship campaign, and you’ve just received a Christmas appeal email from Pastor Sarah and me requesting an end-of-year donation. On top of all that, we’re asking you to approve a loan.

What’s up? In a nutshell, our preschool - the source of so much financial support over the years - has suffered losses due to the pandemic. We hope it will come back like gangbusters sometime next year, but for now we need to take some measures to bridge the gap. One of those measures is to pursue a line of credit (loan), and I hope you will agree. We are a congregational church, and the congregation gets to decide if this is the right thing to do.

Please plan to attend the Special Congregational Meeting via Zoom on Sunday, Dec. 13, as we take a vote to approve some measures that will help us to bridge the gap. If you need more information, please familiarize yourself with the Frequently Asked Questions and Materials provided in this week’s e-blasts. If you have additional questions or concerns, please plan to attend the Informational Forum after church on Sunday, Dec. 6.

While it’s good to have faith that everything will be okay, it’s also important to “put feet on our prayers” so we are as prepared as possible for what the future may bring. That’s why the loan is so important. I’ll “see” you at the meeting!

In hope and optimism,

Tricia

(photos is of my favorite bridge - the one over beautiful Multnomah Falls in Oregon)
One of my favorite services all year is the traditional Thanksgiving Service that IUCC and University Synagogue share together. I was so pleased that we didn’t let the pandemic stand in the way of continuing this special and heartwarming tradition for the 32nd year, even though this time it was online. Like last year, the service included representatives from the Iglesia Vida Abundante Church and the Unified Mosque of Irvine, each of whom provided warm words of welcome.

The service featured a lovely version of “Eli, Eli” with the combined choirs of both congregations. University Synagogue cantor Ruti Braier sang “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and our IUCC quartet sang “How Beautiful Our Spacious Skies.” IUCC Administrative Pastor Steve Swope provided the blessing. I had the great honor of lighting the unity candle with University Synagogue President Eric Blum.

Instead of the usual guest speaker, the two religious leaders took the opportunity to engage in a warm conversation that highlighted the long friendship between their two congregations. The split screen featured University Synagogue’s Rabbi Arnie Rachlis and IUCC’s Pastor Sarah Halverson-Cano as they chatted back and forth about their shared history.

Pastor Sarah spent much of her early years at IUCC, and Rabbi Rachlis was the first rabbi she ever knew. She remembered how as a kid, the members used to affectionately refer to the joint appearances of IUCC Pastor Fred Plumer and Rabbi Arnold Rachlis as “The Fred and Arnie Show.” She reflected on how much this “coming home” means to her and what a difference it made in her early church life to see two religious leaders showing mutual respect. “I think about the person I’ve become and the pastor I’ve become, and I’m very aware that I may not have remained a Christian had I not grown up in this congregation,” she said. “I knew there were multiple paths that could influence and enhance my own journey ... It’s important for us to recognize our familial roots and to celebrate that our families have grown but we really did come from this special sacred family together... I’m reminded of how special those days and years were and what an impact they had on me. We’re here together to nurture and to love.”

“We were wandering Jews,” recalled Rabbi Rachlis. “We started out meeting on campus at UCI, then we moved from rented space to rented space. We realized that we needed someplace more permanent.” They called every church in Irvine to ask about space and finally found a home at IUCC. “We were looking for a church that was on the religiously progressive end, one that we could build a relationship with over the years. There was always such incredible mutual respect in those days. When the new sanctuary was built, the church wanted to make sure we felt at home as well. They asked if we would put a mezuzah over the door. We were honored that the quotation in the foyer was from the Jewish scripture. And the window over the pulpit with its beautiful flowing colors - to us, it always looked like a prayer shawl! The hallmark beyond the physical space was the relationship between the church and the synagogue – the mutual respect.”

Rabbi Rachlis spoke of the importance of gratitude during these difficult days. “It’s a tough time. For most of us since March, in the midst of this pandemic, the dominant emotion has not been gratitude - it’s been fear and anxiety and anger that the pandemic was allowed to rage, that the
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government failed us, that our fellow citizens failed us. The sense of community that you and I built, churches and synagogues and mosques, seems really missing in America. We’ve got to get back to being a commonwealth – the shared body politic is an opportunity for community, not just an opportunity for liberty and freedom. Thanksgiving reminds us that no matter what else we’re feeling, we have to take a breath and put it aside for a little while and think about how lucky we are and how blessed we are.”

Pastor Sarah pointed out that it’s important for us to hold that tension between being thankful and recognizing injustice. “I think as our congregations are perhaps more intentional about doing [what’s right], we want to recognize injustices and name those injustices before we celebrate our own blessings. We have been mining ourselves and our souls as we’ve looked at the privileges that we hold and we share.... In naming gratitude, we also have to recognize we’re holding all of that – all the mismanagement and injustice – and yet being able to find gratitude and coming back to family and coming back to love....When God is in us, God’s people can bring healing to a broken world. Something about that just bubbles up in gratitude.” She spoke of watching caterpillars turn into butterflies and how it filled her with wonder. “Watching miracles unfold fills my soul.”

Rabbi Rachlis agreed, saying, “If we see everything in life as an opportunity for growth, even the very difficult times, we can reflect and learn to hear the still small voice within us in these quieter times .... We are a resilient people who can find opportunities in problematic times. We learned to harness technology – look what we’re doing now! People are watching online and feeling community. We tried to replicate the experience of having a thousand people here for the high holidays and celebrating, and people said it felt like it normally does. It became a very transformative experience. Now everything happens online. By looking into the eyes of the other, even on Zoom, we feel our community, we feel our sense of commonality, we feel our sense of being human together, and we feel our resilience. Every religion has had to change the status quo, sometimes many times, through its development. We had to find a way to reconstruct, to re-create the religious experience because of new phenomena around us. Successful religions have done that and they have made it to the 21st century. We can reflect on the blessings we’ve had in the midst of this calamity, to be able to treasure things we’ve too often neglected. We’ve missed the beauty and power in the timing of small moments.”

Pastor Sarah provided these words of hope: “We’ve had to reconstruct our faith and our entire lives....I’ve witnessed the church be church. It’s so easy to get attached to the building. IUCC had a building campaign just recently and we built a beautiful building, a beautiful sanctuary. And yet our traditions are so much bigger than these walls. I thank God for them, but our faith is bigger than any box. God busts out of boxes, and so do we! I think as we look forward, we feel a sense of hope and a sense of joy. Even though there may be challenges to come, we feel now a renewed sense of hope in humanity. We hold that tension in the brokenness of our world. How do we as people of faith do this work and how do we do it together?”

Rabbi Rachlis saw hope for our country in the diversity of new leadership as shown on the stage in Wilmington, Delaware. “When you see that kind of diversity, there is hope for our country. Sometimes people think Americans delude themselves, but even when we lose sight of what our country is meant to do, we gain it back. I believe in America. I believe that it was good that both candidates were able to secure the first and second largest share of voters in American history. People passionately went out to vote their beliefs. I think that if we can keep in mind that we’re not just red and blue America but red, white and blue, we can remember our commonality and we can create a greater American vision again.”

Pastor Sarah’s closing words were very fitting: “There is a time to grow and a time to build, and may we be those healers who reconstruct and progress - that call us forward to be a blessing to the nation as we live out in love and peace together.”
IUCC’s Early Childhood Center (a.k.a. our preschool) has been a service to the Irvine community since its inception early in the life of the congregation. Irvine needs child care and like many other congregations in the city, we have been able to offer that service. Dedicated teachers, warm welcomes, and a program that does not explicitly take a Christian-religious approach won us a loyal following over the years. For example, we have a number of client families whose employers rotate them to Irvine from Japan. Word of mouth being the strong influence that it is, we succeed when Family A returns to Japan but passes the word to Family B, about to rotate to Irvine, that when they arrive in our city, they should strongly consider IUCC’s preschool.

In about the last five years the school has been increasingly a producer of income for the church. In an environment of strong enrollments that have reflected strong parent/client satisfaction, the Administration Board authorized improvements to the building that centered on turning the former congregational administrative + senior pastor office space into another classroom. That plus some work on children’s bathrooms resulted in an increase in our enrollment ceiling, from 48 to 63. The result was record net income in 2019, and in the budget adopted by the congregation in January 2020, another record year was forecast – pre-pandemic.

As summer arrived the issue became whether, when and how to re-open the preschool. Remaining closed and dark risked losing both client families and teaching staff on a permanent basis. Yet reopening was challenging as client families were trying to figure out whether it was safe to return their kids to us. As well, and crucially, responding to safety concerns in the COVID-19 era, our licensing agency changed our teacher–to-student ratios, and our square feet-per-student requirements, that leave us presently unable to serve more than 40 kids but with a number of teachers that, pre-pandemic, could have served notably more.

The Center reopened on July 5 with Administration Board approval, and we have slowly rebuilt our student population. After losing money across the summer and into the fall, the preschool appears to be headed to a break-even financial posture in early 2021. But the income to the congregation won’t return until (a) licensing allows us to return to the pre-COVID student-to-teacher and square foot-per-child regulations, and (b) client families are again fully comfortable on the safety issues.

We look forward to serving more kids efficiently and profitably when licensing tells us that we can return to our January 2020 programs; and licensing will do that when the pandemic is effectively over. And that will happen: well, friends, you can forecast that for yourselves. Mid-2021 or later, perhaps?

And in closing, one further comment. The preschool closing / reopening / losing money / keeping the business viable issues are not specific to IUCC, and not limited to Irvine or to California. Our misery has had way too much company; the issues are the same nationwide, if not worldwide, for child care providers. We have heard clarion calls for Congress to adopt another CARES Act or similar pandemic relief, and in the contours of that action specifically to support child care providers. We may all hope that some policy makers are listening.
In thinking about how we found IUCC, one thing is certain: Neither one of us was really looking for a church per se, let alone a Christian church. Our experience with organized religion had been less than positive. Eduardo was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and grew up Roman Catholic. Cheryl was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, and grew up in the realm of Mormons. Cheryl’s father was a Lutheran and her mother was inactive in the Mormon Church. Both of Eduardo’s parents were Roman Catholic.

Cheryl and Eduardo were married in the Los Angeles Mormon Temple on December 20, 1980. Trying to live out the Mormon doctrine during their first years of marriage was met with a lot of challenges. Eduardo felt as though he always needed to somehow prove himself to be truly accepted in the Mormon Church. He experienced what we now know were racial micro-aggressions related to being born in Latin America (e.g., “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable in the Spanish speaking ward?”). Over time, Cheryl became more and more uncomfortable with the Mormon patriarchy and what it viewed as her role in the church.

Neither Cheryl nor Eduardo had any real understanding of Progressive Christianity. As members of the Mormon Church, they always felt disconnected. Prior to their marriage it was expected that Eduardo would serve as a Mormon missionary while Cheryl would become a dedicated wife and homemaker. These two expectations were met with rebellious resistance. How Eduardo became a Mormon is a whole story in itself that would require an extensive narrative. However, neither one of them fulfilled the doctrinal expectations of the Mormon Church. Both Eduardo and Cheryl were college students and shortly after their marriage they opted to continue their undergraduate and graduate education and pursued their current professions. Eduardo became a mathematician while Cheryl became a speech language pathologist. Both have a love of education.

When their only son, Mikhail Andrej (Mischa) was 3 years old, Eduardo and Cheryl began to separate themselves from the Mormon Church. During the next 10 years or so, spiritual retreats and programs were a solution for their yearning for spirituality. Visits were made to the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Baptist churches in their area.

Cheryl found La Casa de Maria, an ecumenical retreat center in Montecito, California, as a place of spiritual renewal and Eduardo spent time at Manresa Jesuit Retreat Center in Azusa, California. Visiting the various churches did not really lead them to any sort of community of worship where both were comfortable. Cheryl is still finding her connection with the God of her understanding which at this time is through nature, and she is investigating spiritual practices of the Native American and Wiccan traditions practiced by her late sister, Val.

Cheryl and Eduardo had their first exposure to Progressive Christianity during a labor union convention where one of the keynote speakers was the Rev. Dr. Sarah Halverson-Cano. Little did they know that Pastor Sarah would be a part of their spiritual lives with IUCC or that Eduardo would be part of the search process which would ultimately bring Sarah back to IUCC! Eduardo and Cheryl were so moved by Pastor Sarah’s keynote address during that labor union convention that both of them in conversations sort of agreed they needed to find her church which was in Costa Mesa. Well, life got busy and that was put on the back burner.

Eduardo’s near fatal automobile accident in 2005 led him to a path to search for the God of his understanding. Little by little, he began to pursue that path which was influenced by many events but particularly by the film The Book of Eli. He had never read the Bible or been drawn to anything religious or spiritual. One day he told Cheryl, after seeing the movie The Book of Eli that he was going
to read the Bible from cover to cover. He had no religious training and basically zero background with anything outside of what he was exposed to growing up as a Roman Catholic and later as a Mormon.

Eduardo decided to pursue theological/divinity graduate studies and met his first Spiritual Director. His Spiritual Director encouraged him to find a community of worship because, according to him, one cannot do Christianity as a hermit or “solo.” As a Roman Catholic and someone who has a passion for formalities, protocol, ritual, and a sense of order, Eduardo needed to find a church that would fit his idiosyncrasies. Cheryl, on the other hand, had serious reluctance towards organized religion or in “church” period. While Cheryl was completely uninterested in anything related to church, religion, rules and regulations, Eduardo decided to investigate churches in Irvine. How exactly they ended up at IUCC is still a mystery for them because they cannot recall.

Eduardo decided to explore IUCC and he met over coffee with the then-pastor of IUCC, the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström. After meeting with Pastor Paul, Eduardo felt like he had found a church community where people are educated, and not everyone agrees. It is certainly not a place to sit in the pew and have one’s mind filled with a top-down polity.

The Saturday before Eduardo’s first visit to IUCC, he asked Cheryl to go with him and her response was “You can go if you want... I am just not there yet.” Eduardo asked her if she would come for just one time because he did not want to go alone. Cheryl agreed to go just one time. So what was that like? The Rev. Steve Swope was teaching a Sunday school class that, of all things, dealt with racism and privilege. Cheryl and Eduardo met the Rev. Dr. George Johnson, Dr. Jim Martin, the Rev. Dr. Bil Aulenbach, and the congregants that usually attend adult education on Sunday mornings.

After that first experience, on their drive home they were wonderfully surprised about what was being discussed at a church: racism and privilege in addition to a class where the diversity of opinions and beliefs or theology was anything but uniform. They both still remember George’s affirmation about struggling with the construct of the Apostle’s Creed. On their way home they kept talking about how IUCC seemed to be very similar to the church associated with the labor union convention keynote speaker, Pastor Sarah. Both Cheryl and Eduardo returned the following Sunday and then the Sunday after that, and as a geometric progression they kept coming back.

The Rev. Swope eventually asked Eduardo if he would cover an adult education class meeting for him. As an educator, Eduardo jumped at the opportunity. He became very involved and active in IUCC, and both he and Cheryl finally found the Spiritual Sanctuary they were so much in need of.

Today, five years later, their lives have been enriched by the many friends and fellow congregants they have met. They both attest to IUCC being instrumental in their respective spiritual journeys. This Spiritual Sanctuary is now an integral part of their lives. Eduardo is currently very involved with Adult Programs and the Diversity & Inclusion Task Force. He is in his Member in Discernment (MID) process for ordination in the UCC under the chairperson of his MID Committee, the Rev. Dr. Bil Aulenbach. Cheryl has been active in the hospitality and congregational care ministries.

Both Cheryl and Eduardo are retiring in 2021 (June and December respectively). Eduardo’s goals include being ordained in the UCC and continuing with adult ministries/teaching, and Cheryl plans to pursue hobbies (TBD), learn Japanese, and listen and respond to her God who “is still speaking.”
Concern America Craft Sale

For two consecutive weeks on Sunday, December 6, and Sunday, December 20, IUCC will be hosting a Concern America Virtual Fair Trade Craft Sale at www.marketplace.concernamerica.org featuring unique and quality handcrafts that provide us with the opportunity to “buy gifts with a purpose.” We have long welcomed Concern America in person to sell their beautiful and life transforming handcrafts, and this year we will host their sale virtually.

Take advantage of Free Shipping when you spend $75 or more by using coupon code IUCC2020 at checkout. Also please add the name of your church (IUCC) to the note section of checkout. This year there are many new handcrafted textiles, ceramics and wood products from Bangladesh, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Mozambique. These beautifully made, fair trade items were selected to be reminders that when a Concern America product is purchased we are providing a source of income to materially poor families while supporting community development, protecting the environment, and ensuring fair working conditions and fair prices earned for their work.

Concern America is an international development organization based in Santa Ana, CA that builds capacity in health care, clean water, education, and economic opportunities. Learn more by checking out their website: www.concernamerica.org

IUCC Choir performed at NMIIC Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

Our IUCC choir (shown above and below on Zoom) did a terrific job performing at the Newport Mesa Irvine Interfaith Council (NMIIC) Thanksgiving virtual event on November 22. Under the direction of Choir Director Chris Peterson, they sang “We Are Called” and (with others) performed “Nothing More.”

The event featured music from nine different faith traditions and demonstrated our interconnectedness on a truly global scale. IUCC Pastor Sarah Halverson-Cano is the president of NMIIC.

The mission of NMIIC is to be “A spiritual and ethical force of faith community representatives that enable inter-religious dialogue and service.”
Irvine United Congregational Church will be hosting a virtual sale for 2 weeks
~~ December 6 - 20, 2020 ~~
with Concern America’s Marketplace of Fair Trade Crafts at:
marketplace.concernamerica.org

Shop online during the 2 week event and receive Free Shipping when you purchase $75 or more with the coupon code: IUCC2020

Please add the name of your church (IUCC) to the note section of checkout!

Concern America’s fair trade craft program provides direct support to materially impoverished artisans and their communities.

For More Information
Call: 714-953-8575
Email: info@concernamerica.org
visit our website: www.ConcernAmerica.org
This is an invitation to join IUCC’s Advocates for Peace and Justice e-mail list, and by so doing, effectively to join the Advocates ministry. Read on to figure out whether you want to sign up.

Background. IUCC’s Advocates for Peace and Justice ministry is one expression of the congregation’s commitment to our Just Peace designation within the United Church of Christ. As the UCC puts it, Just Peace congregations “corporately name and boldly proclaim a public identity as a justice-doing, peace-seeking church.” [For more, see: https://www.ucc.org/justice_just-peace.]

At IUCC, the Advocates have focused on issues of public policy by:

- sponsoring speakers and events.
- maintaining a “sibling” relationship with IUCC’s Green Faith committee.
- “signing on” to statements or petitions sponsored by outside groups (always on behalf only of the Advocates: we don’t speak for the congregation).
- offering members and friends an opportunity to sign petitions or other communications to public officials.
- seeking opportunities to publish opinion pieces in local newspapers.
- leading Ballot Forums to explain the pros and cons of propositions.

and on a handful of occasions, we have

- placed a resolution in front of the congregation at a semi-annual meeting, encouraging the congregation per se to take a stand on a topic of justice, or of peace.

During the general election (and pandemic – social distancing) season, the Advocates as a group have done . . . well, not much. The election took up most of the oxygen. But now, in a post-general election moment, with the arrival of a new Federal administration in January, and with new leadership at Irvine’s city hall, a time for “making some good trouble” may be at hand.

A Modest Proposal. You are invited to send an e-mail to Steve Swope, our Administrative Pastor, at Steve@iucc.org. Steve will be refreshing and updating the Advocates mailing list. You will then receive occasional e-mails, which will do things like encourage you to:

- offer an opinion on a topic under e-mail discussion.
- “vote” on taking an action, often signing on to a letter authored by another group.
- go to a city’s, or to an elected official’s web site to offer your opinion about a topic of interest.

or perhaps to

- read an item of current interest.

And here is a small foretaste of hints at good reading in a post-election environment. The American Prospect has a fascinating item, The Day One Agenda: The Next Administration, Using Presidential Power for Good. See it at: https://prospect.org/day-one-agenda. Items found there may be worth expressions of support from the Advocates. We are also impressed by The Evergreen Collaborative’s Evergreen Action Plan: A National Mobilization to Defeat the Climate Crisis and Build a Just and Thriving Clean Energy Economy. See their five key principles, and their twelve strategy elements at: https://collaborative.evergreenaction.com/plan.

Interested? Drop an e-mail to Steve!
Let’s face it: we’re all a little sick and tired of each other. Some couples have not been able to leave the house and spend time with different people in the workplace. Even if we don’t like some of them, at least they’re different! Teachers are teaching from home with their students’ faces on the screen and their own children’s faces sulking or begging for attention. Children got a break from mom and dad and spent the day with a different adult. Parents had time without kids. Siblings who got a break from brothers and sisters and got to hang out with friends are having their siblings as their only friends. All of this face time is too much! It doesn’t matter how much we love each other; we need a break from each other. I’m also social distancing so I haven’t been able to hear the snappy, snippy, frustrated, angry, impatient exchanges between the people in your family, but I can guess.

I think I’m also safe in guessing that money is tighter than usual, causing even more frustration as children expect some compensation for all the disruption from Santa. So here are the Doctor’s orders: In addition to whatever else you can afford, get some colored paper, some envelopes, and some ribbons and put together some “custom-made gifts” for everyone in the family. Follow the instructions below and combine the gifts with a Christmas “scavenger hunt” around the house or apartment. Hide them all. If you open gifts Christmas morning, do this Christmas Eve. If you do gifts Christmas Eve, do this Christmas morning. Everyone looks for the envelopes or folded pieces of paper wrapped in a ribbon with their name on it. Don’t pick up anything you find that isn’t for you. Others help those who can’t read yet. The dog and cat get some too.

Before Christmas each person will do their “shopping” in their minds, by thinking of all the people they live with. Everyone gets some pieces of paper, some envelopes, some ribbons, and some scotch tape. We’re going to think about what exactly we love about each other, even when we’re upset with them. It’s a group activity - no sharing except for the little ones.

Each person gets as many envelopes and/or pieces of paper as they can think of something different to write. On each piece of paper, on the inside write very specifically what each person brings to the family as a gift to everyone else. Parents tell parents. Kids tell kids. Parents tell kids. Kids tell parents. Write without talking so it can be a secret. If you need help, only get help from one person so the other person will be surprised. Here are some examples to give you some ideas, but it’s better to think of something you know from living with each person.

- **Are they:** smart, good with words, good at explaining things; funny; good at telling jokes; good at games; good at remembering things; good at reading to you; telling stories about things that happen.
- **Are they:** good at figuring things out; good with numbers; do they like science and interesting things; do they like to try different things; can they remember sports numbers like game scores or batting averages or who won the last game.
- **Are they:** good at drawing; can they find their way around things and not get lost; do they have a good imagination; are they good at "picturing things"; are they "original" and creative.
- **Are they:** good at singing or playing an instrument; can they dance; do they like things with a "beat"; do they play good music for others to listen to.
- **Are they:** good at sports; good at making silly gestures and movements; good at throwing and catching stuff; can they build things or put things together; do they help "fix" things.
- **Are they:** warm and fuzzy; do they give good hugs; do they make good friends and get along well with others; do they notice when someone needs some kindness; are they helpful.
- **Are they:** kind to animals; do they enjoy the outdoors; do they like to take pictures or draw pictures of nature or study the stars.

When the “hunt” is over and everything has been found, have each person tell everybody else in the family what they like about them, and how they are a “gift” to the family. It’s okay if they act silly or have trouble saying things out loud; find a way to make that something likable too.

They will want “stuff” too, of course, but I’m thinking these gifts will last longer.
Practicing the Discipline and Ministry of Silence in Prayer
by Dr. Eduardo Jesús Arismendi-Pardi
Adult Education Ministries, and Diversity and Inclusion Task Force

Silence can be defined as a physical withdrawal from conversational exchanges with others. The silence which this reflective/experiential essay addresses is—spiritual silence. From an Ignatian perspective, the practice of the discipline and ministry of silence is a prerequisite for coming to know God. This essay is divided into three themes (a) defining silence as a prelude to centeredness in prayer, (b) challenges in achieving spiritual silence, and (c) intrinsic spiritual rewards drawn from the practice of the discipline and ministry of silence.

Defining Silence as a Prelude to Centeredness in Prayer
Silence can be classified into two broad categories: physical silence and spiritual silence. The latter of these two is necessary in terms of achieving centeredness prior to entering the act of prayer which can be defined as a form of divine conversation with God. In reference to spiritual silence, Mother Theresa of Calcutta urges us to listen in silence because if our heart is full of other things, one cannot hear the voice of God. Silence can therefore be understood and defined as the clearing of whatever blocks the mind from being aware and connected to God. Such awareness and connectedness can be achieved by arriving at silence of the heart, which is being able to hear what God says beyond words.

Silent prayer has a long biblical history as evidenced in numerous biblical passages in which one reads about Jesus going away from crowds, noise, and even spoken services of the synagogues thus retreating to the desert to be in solitude to pray. Silence in relation to achieving a centering moment is real communication between humankind and God. Silence is an experience in stillness for those seeking to learn about the art of prayer; it is not necessary for one to retreat to the desert to achieve silence. However, setting aside time to quiet the mind leads to the silence required to be able to hear and discern God’s voice. Silence as a prelude to centeredness in prayer can be defined as detachment from the chores and concerns of daily life. Silence allows us to experience intimacy with God. Finally, God is a friend of silence, and in that silence God listens to us. In our silence God speaks to our soul, and there we will hear the voice of God. The fruit of silence is faith. The fruit of faith is prayer, the fruit of prayer is love, the fruit of love is service, and the fruit of service is silence. In the silence of the heart God speaks. If we face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to us. Therefore, it is only then when we realize our nothingness, our emptiness, that God can fill us with a Divine Spirit.

Challenges in Achieving Spiritual Silence
Achieving spiritual silence is extremely difficult because this type of silence is often invaded by trivialities of life and thoughts linked to things that need to be accomplished for the day such as, for example, communications that need to take place, emails that need to be read and answered, phone calls that need to be made or returned, thoughts about work and those with whom we work, and/or matters of family relations. In fact, one can achieve perfect physical silence as a prelude to achieving spiritual silence only to feel as if one is being pulled by an irritated, crying 2-year old child pleading for something that one cannot provide at the very moment. Silent prayer is a form of divine dialog that leads to an intimate divine conversation with God. However, from a theological perspective, achieving silence and spiritual oneness with God is often invaded by dark spiritual influences—evil—that cause one to thwart one's purposes of seeking silence to hear God.

In the act of silence in prayer, one needs to be watchful of the intellect, memories, and fantasies. An antidote to challenge those distractions in achieving silence is to focus on continuous prayer as evidenced in the words of St. Paul urging one to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NIV). The Prayer of Jesus, that is, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me” which is a variation of “look thou upon me, and be merciful upon me, as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name” (Psalm 119:132, KJV) can be mentally uttered continually regardless of what one may be doing at the time, be it work or being engaged in accomplishing some task or chore. Though the achievement of silence in prayer may be among one of many difficult tasks within the Christian spiritual experience, one thing is certain, and that is being in silence is necessarily essential to knowing God and having a personal relationship with God as evidenced in the verse “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10, KJV). Finally, within one's Christian life journey, one can be reassured that silence is the essence of being momentarily
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cut off from secular concerns to thus dedicate time for spiritual growth. The achievement of silence within the Christian experience leads one to a rebirth or infancy of the spirit that leads to the attainment of the fullness of Christ.

Intrinsic Spiritual Rewards Drawn From the Practice of the Discipline and Ministry of Silence

The single most important spiritual reward drawn from the practice of the discipline and ministry of silence is perhaps an honest and open divine conversation, in communion, with God. The practice of silent prayer or inward meditation leads one to spiritual wisdom in terms of arriving at the inquiry of “where is God in this?” or “what would Jesus Christ do in this case?” when dealing and interacting with others.

The practice of the discipline and ministry of silence in terms of its relationship with prayer leads one to become a living prayer and as such to examine one’s conscience, but ultimately the stillness of silence as a spiritual experience leads to love in all things (cf. 1 Corinthians 13) and leaving in the hands of God that which is beyond reach—an act of faith. The practice of the discipline and ministry of silence also leads to the experience of the presence of God where words are not needed.

Finally, the continuous prayer (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17) or inward meditation leads to spiritual peace and “praying without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, NASB) orations such as the Prayer of Jesus which provides protection from falling into separation from the oneness of the Spirit of God. This inward meditation has its roots in the fifth century Eastern Orthodox tradition of constant repetition of short prayers which is known by the technical term kryptes melete. These short prayers can be spiritually effective regardless of what one may be doing.

Conclusion

The practice of the discipline and ministry of silence in prayer is a difficult task that may cause one to abandon it if one lacks patience and does not take the necessary steps to accomplish an honest, sincere and uncomplicated conversation with God. Hearing God’s will and message or revelations can only occur if one is spiritually fit and that fitness rests upon being still to thus hear God’s words (cf. Psalm 46:10). Prayer is dialog and such dialog requires strict discipline to achieve. Sometimes life’s events and circumstances lead one to a life of prayer and meditation, especially when all else fails or when secular solutions are grounded on self-realization rather than realization dependent upon the grace of God.