

## Looking Forward to the Season of Lent



While 2020 seems to have been the longest year on record, January of 2021 sure felt packed! With five Sundays we had the opportunity to linger in the seasons intentionally reflecting on the turning of the

year, pausing to look for the light of Epiphany, finding inspiration in the life of Dr. King with the prophetic words of a womanist theologian and chaplain, imagining the early life of Jesus and what it means to live in the middle and learn from life's experiences, and finally reflecting on his Baptism and our own, as we embrace an ongoing baptismal experience. At a national level we witnessed quite the changing of the guard, preceded by a dramatic and terrifying attack on our Capitol, as we prayed for peace in our nation. All the while, the pandemic raged.

I'm mindful that we are holding a lot. We are in a constant state of grief over the mounting number of lives lost to Covid 19. We are hopeful about a vaccine, while still frustrated by the challenge of getting it. We long to connect but know that it will have to take place through the internet because we're just not there yet. Meanwhile, life continues on and we're just a month or so short of a year online, and somehow our church is just as busy as ever!

This month we begin the Season of Lent, and Lent is a perfect time to recognize our journeys. This year I invite you to embrace "The Journey Inside" as we reflect upon this year's journey inside our homes and introspectively journey inside ourselves. We'll start the month with Scout Sunday, and then a celebration of Fat Sunday (a riff on Mardi Gras: Fat Tuesday) as we celebrate life before Lent begins.

Ash Wednesday, February 17, marks the beginning of the season and I'm looking forward to beginning the journey by journeying to and with you. This year we'll have a "Drive-By/Drive-Thru/Sit-In Ash Wednesday." What does that mean? It means if you don't leave the house - don't worry, I'll come to you. If you do leave the house, come on by the church and drive through for ashes between 5-6:30pm. If you don't want to do either, sign up ahead of time and we'll send ashes to your home (or you can make your own) and experience an online service at 7pm!

There's so much going on at IUCC: I celebrate the vitality of this church! I'm looking forward to holding the tension of the journey and the pause, to an intentional introspective Lent as well as the intentional connection we make with each other on a daily and weekly basis.

I don't have anywhere near all the answers when it comes to the vaccine, but like you, I want to help. A small group of us are joining together to see how we can help our community, so if you'd like to help collect resources and brainstorm on how we can connect the most vulnerable of our IUCC community together, please contact me. And if you're need of the vaccine and have yet to successfully register please reach out so we can try to help you or if you're able go to [www.othena.com](http://www.othena.com) to input your information.

I do pray that our Lenten journey leads us closer together in all ways...and that when we finally do gather together (whenever that may be) we will celebrate the deep connections we have forged during this time.

Until then, Happy February!

With Love,  
*Pastor Sarah*

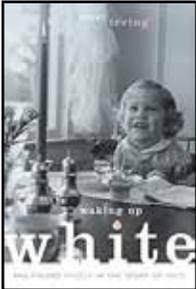
[PastorSarah@iucc.org](mailto:PastorSarah@iucc.org)



# From the Administrative Pastor

by the Rev. Steve Swope

There's a lot in this new year to keep us connected and conversing. New book study groups have begun for women, and there's a new Diversity & Inclusion book study just starting.



The Diversity & Inclusion read is *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving. Options are Tuesdays at 9:00 am or Thursdays at 7:00 pm. A few copies of the book are available in the church office (\$18 if you're able); it's also available online. To sign up, email Terry LePage for Tuesdays (tjinirvine@gmail.com) or Craig Repp for Thursdays (craigrepp@gmail.com).

## Saturday Morning Forum

Diversity & Inclusion also has a Saturday Forum scheduled for Feb. 13 at 10:30 am. The topic is "Flavors of Empire: Food & the Making of Thai America" by Dr. Mark Padoongpatt, based on his book of the same title. Go to [www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us) – use Meeting ID 886 4279 7633 and Passcode 684179.

## Talking About Work

Talking About Work continues its monthly conversations on Feb. 20 at 10:30 am, with Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi and Sarah Wall. Ken Wyant's Tuesday Bible Study continues at 4:00 pm each week, as does my Old Testament Survey on Wednesdays at 7:00 pm.



And the Seekers are back! Patty McCarthy will be convening the Seekers on Zoom, at 10:00 am on the third Tuesday of each month (Feb. 16). Look for the link in the weekly email updates.



We also have a guest speaker this spring, co-sponsored by our friends at University Synagogue. Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, a friend of Rev. David Pattee, will introduce topics from her new book *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. She'll join us on Zoom at 1:00 pm on Sunday, March 7.

Rabbi Mikva serves as the Rabbi Herman E. Schaalman Chair in Jewish Studies and the Senior Faculty Fellow of the InterReligious Institute at Chicago Theological Seminary. And her book will be given free to the first 45 households who register for this event! You can sign up at [iucc.org/register](http://iucc.org/register).



Ash Wednesday is February 17, and Pastor Sarah is preparing several creative ways we can observe the holy day. She will be offering "ashes at home" kits during the day, and you can sign up online at [iucc.org/register](http://iucc.org/register) – pick the 10-12, 12-2, or 2-4 block of time for your safe, masked drop-off!

She will also be sharing "drive-thru ashes" in the church parking lot from 5:00-6:30 pm. And there will be a brief but meaningful Ash Wednesday service online at 7:00 pm.

The recent rains have perked up our landscaping, and our buildings are still dry inside. Let's be thankful that maintenance and utility costs have been lower in this time of separation and safety.



One thing we need to begin thinking about is organic, or "green," waste. California law now requires businesses (including faith communities) to recycle organic/green waste – including lawn clippings, hedge trimmings, leaves, etc. – plus food waste and food-contaminated paper.

This will bring changes for all of us – the preschool, coffee hours when we come back together, outside groups, as well as our landscaper. The Green Faith Committee, chaired by Chuck Heath, will soon begin sharing information about better organic/green waste habits, and we hope to start practicing them by the end of the summer.

A final note: if you have NOT received your 2020 Giving Statement by Monday, Feb. 8, please contact the church office. Giving Statements were put in the mail on Jan. 25.

# From the Moderator

by Tricia Aynes



Things are looking up, church family! I was pleased to see so many of your beautiful faces at our virtual Winter Congregational Meeting on January 31, where we approved the 2021 Budget and welcomed the new Ministry of Diversity & Inclusion.

Our Treasurer announced that we had received a second round of government Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds in the amount of nearly \$172,000, which was significantly more than we had forecast. Per the SBA website <https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/loans/coronavirus-relief-options/paycheck-protection-program/second-draw-ppp-loans>, "SBA, in consultation with the U.S. Treasury Department, reopened the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) for First Draw PPP Loans the week of January 11, 2021. SBA began accepting applications for Second Draw PPP Loans on January 13, 2021....The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) now allows certain eligible borrowers that previously received a PPP loan to apply for a Second Draw PPP Loan with the same general loan terms as their First Draw PPP Loan. Second Draw PPP Loans can be used to help fund payroll costs, including benefits. Funds can also be used to pay for mortgage interest, rent, utilities, worker protection costs related to COVID-19 ..."

While this is called a loan, it is forgivable if used for authorized purposes (primarily employee payroll and benefit costs). All of the money we received in the first round of PPP was used for authorized purposes and was forgiven. Receiving this PPP money will help lower the amount of money we need to draw down on our line of credit from Cornerstone, which is very good news indeed!

I am delighted that we voted unanimously to welcome the Ministry of Diversity & Inclusion, which is now an official part of our Bylaws. The Diversity & Inclusion Task Force has been operating for some time now and has grown into an active and vibrant group that provides many informational programs, book discussion groups, and opportunities to talk about what we can do to combat racism. Congratulations to the members of this great new ministry!

Pastor Sarah keeps us entranced and entertained with her thoughtful and insightful sermons each Sunday; her level of knowledge and energy are a joy to behold, and we are

so blessed to have her as our pastor! Chris Peterson, our talented Music Director, works seamlessly with our gifted choral interns, extraordinary pianist Josh Chandra, and wonderful choir members to provide us with uplifting music that fills our souls. Administrative Pastor Steve Swope manages to multitask his myriad of duties with grace and dignity (his very efficient handling of the voting process at Sunday's meeting was very helpful, allowing me to focus on chairing the meeting).

While we still can't meet in person, our online ministries continue to thrive:

- Our women's book clubs are flourishing and growing, providing an opportunity for participants to gather in community and share experiences.
- For those looking for in-depth Bible study, there are two weekly classes: Our Tuesday Bible study led by Ken Wyant is looking at the life of David, while our Wednesday Bible study led by Steve Swope provides a detailed look at the Old Testament.
- There's an exciting program coming up on March 7 that we are co-sponsoring with our friends at University Synagogue. Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, author of *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, will give a 90-minute talk followed by a question and answer session. Read more about this special program on page 5.
- Our Mission & Service Ministry continues to provide help to those in need. They are gathering food and supplies for the hungry (see following page for how you can help).
- Our Advocates for Peace & Justice and the Green Faith Committee recently collaborated on a letter to government officials about support for measures to combat climate change (see their letter on page 7).
- Our Congregational Care Ministry and our Stephen Ministry continue to provide loving support and care for those in our congregation who are suffering.

Even in the midst of this pandemic, there is much to be thankful for. I am thankful for you, my friends. Your strength, resilience, and constancy are keeping our congregation going through hard times. I keep all of you in daily prayer. Onward we go!

In hope and optimism,

*Tricia*



## **BIN COLLECTION FOR FAMILIES FORWARD FEBRUARY 1-25**

Our crisis is growing, and more people than ever are looking for hope and help. Food banks are feeding hundreds of thousands of people each month in Orange County. We are now in a new year, but we have continued uncertainty. The need for food remains high and food insecurity has become even more critical since last spring.

In Orange County there are more than 450,000 people at risk of going hungry each month. More than 20 percent of children are living in households considered “food insecure.” They are unsure of where their next meal will come from.

IUCC is proud to support Families Forward a few times each year to support their food pantry. Food donations are needed now more than ever. Let’s help to fill their shelves with the basic necessities. Although we cannot gather on Sunday mornings, collection bins will put out on the patio Monday – Thursday from 9:30AM – 4:30PM. All donations will then be collected by Families Forward as the bins get full.

### **Most Needed Food Pantry Items:**

- Cereal
- Pasta Sauce & Dried Pasta
- Canned Fruits & Vegetables
- Peanut Butter
- Canned Chicken and Canned Tuna
- Canned Beans
- Canned & Dried Soup
- Diapers (Sizes 5,6 are greatest need)
- Baby Wipes
- Hand sanitizers and Disinfectant wipes
- Single use face masks

Thank you - Mission & Service Ministry

## Dangerous Religious Ideas Co-Sponsored with University Synagogue

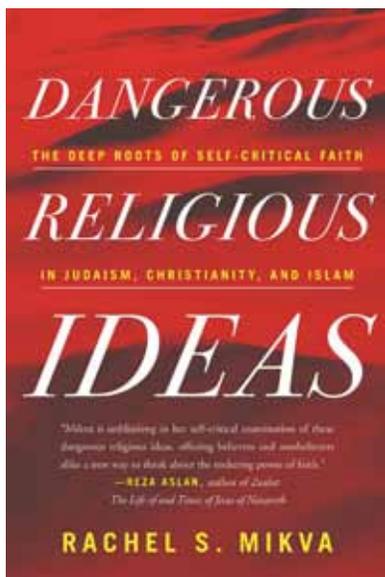
Sunday, March 7 at 1:00 pm on Zoom  
\$10 cost for online participants

Irvine United Congregational Church and co-sponsor University Synagogue of Irvine, CA., will host Rabbi Rachel S. Mikva, author of *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, for a 90-minute talk with questions. The event will take place via Zoom, with sign-ups at [iucc.org/register](http://iucc.org/register). The first 45 households will receive a free copy of the book!

Scripture's abiding relevance can inspire great goodness, such as welcoming the stranger and extending compassion for the poor. But its authority has also been wielded to defend slavery, marginalize LGBTQ individuals, ignore science, and justify violence.

Grounded in close readings of scripture and tradition in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, religious scholar Rachel Mikva demonstrates that the Abrahamic religions have always been aware of their tremendous power both to harm and to heal. And so they have transmitted their sacred stories along with built-in tools—interpretive traditions—to do the necessary work of taking on dangerous religious ideas and fostering self-critical faith.

Rabbi Mikva serves as the Rabbi Herman E. Schaalman Chair in Jewish Studies and the Senior Faculty Fellow of the InterReligious Institute at Chicago Theological Seminary.



## Ministry of Diversity & Inclusion Events

IUCC is thrilled to welcome the Ministry of Diversity & Inclusion, added to our Bylaws by unanimous vote at our January 31 Winter Congregational Meeting. Diversity & Inclusion has been operating as a Task Force for some time now and has grown into a flourishing group that will continue to open our minds and hearts to the wonderful array of diversity around us!



### Book Group: Waking Up White

The Diversity & Inclusion read is *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving. Options are Tuesdays at 9:00 am or Thursdays at 7:00 pm. A few copies of the book are available in the church office (\$18 if you're able); it's also available online. To sign up, email Terry LePage for Tuesdays ([tjinirvine@gmail.com](mailto:tjinirvine@gmail.com)) or Craig Repp for Thursdays ([craigrepp@gmail.com](mailto:craigrepp@gmail.com)).



### Feb. 13: Saturday Forum "Flavors of Empire"

Diversity & Inclusion also has a Saturday Forum scheduled for Feb. 13 at 10:30 am. The topic is "Flavors of Empire: Food & the Making of Thai America" by Dr. Mark Padoongpatt, based on his book of the same title. Go to [www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us) – use Meeting ID 886 4279 7633 and Passcode 684179.

### Feb. 20: Talking About Work

Talking About Work continues its monthly conversations on Feb. 20 at 10:30 am, with Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi and Sarah Wall. "Talking about Work" aims to explore the opportunities and challenges of our work lives through the lens of a progressive faith.





## Virtual Coffee Hour

Hello Congregation Family! Hospitality wants YOU to come join us every Sunday at 10:30 am and/or noon for IUCC virtual coffee hour!



Lent marks the 40 days leading up to Easter (excluding Sundays). It is a time of remembering the events leading up to Jesus' death. It can also represent the 40 days he spent fasting in the wilderness while preparing for his ministry. It is a time for reflection and renewing of the spirit: a time to engage in introspection and develop a deeper connection to God. Many people will choose to give up something for Lent to practice self-discipline and self-sacrifice.

This year, Lent starts on Ash Wednesday, February 17th and ends on Thursday, April 1. While this period is used for somber reflection, it is also a time filled with faith and hope: a time to focus more on our relationship with God and less on ourselves.

Pastor Sarah is preparing several creative ways we can observe Ash Wednesday, and you can read about them on page 1 (Sarah's article) and page 2 (Steve Swope's article). Options range from "ashes at home" kits to "drive-thru ashes," depending on your comfort level. IUCC will also offer an online Ash Wednesday service at 7 p.m. that evening.

Virtual Coffee Hour isn't an hour long, nor is it about coffee...guess the name is misleading but what in 2021 isn't? So what is Virtual Coffee Hour? Well, it is a space to congregate virtually. When service was in person, first service would socialize with second service on the patio and then second service would socialize again after service! This is exactly what Virtual Coffee Hour is: a time to just congregate safely.

When you join coffee hour, you may ask yourself what are the topics or rules? Simple: the topic is whatever you make it, and the rules are limited to just be polite and respectful. Nearly every coffee hour, we have talked about the service, but we also talk about what is going on in the moment. At a recent coffee hour, we talked about the vaccination and discovered that some fellow congregates are having issues getting signed up! We were able to help provide the resources needed to support our church family. While we can't meet in person, meeting virtually is the next best thing.

So how do you go about joining a Virtual Coffee Hour? Simply copy the link at the end and save it to a word document or wherever you want. Every week, the same website link will work, which means you don't have to keep looking for a new link every week. If you lose the link, just ask for the link in service or check your Friday email from IUCC and the same link will be there! When you join us at coffee hour, you can stay 5 minutes or 5 hours (I rather you didn't stay for 5 hours but you could). Bring your friends and your pets. Those at coffee hour don't need to be members, just people who want to hold civil conversations with living people and smiling faces.

Give Virtual Coffee Hour a try! Do you really have something better to do on a Sunday than connect and provide fellowship with your fellow Christians?  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/77315117266>



2/06	Jim Aynes	2/25	Brian McComb
2/22	Iris Bjorklund	2/23	Kris Miaco
2/28	John Emerson	2/02	Donna Picard
2/03	Annika Evensen	2/04	Elizabeth Rodriguez
2/10	Greg Guth	2/03	Matthew Ruiz
2/21	Jim Hamilton	2/21	Steve Sprenger
2/24	Alex Ingal	2/15	Peggy Stalter
2/13	Kaytee Macdonald	2/21	Lynn Terry

J. Alex Ingal  
IUCC Hospitality

The Advocates for Peace and Justice, an IUCC ministry focused on Just Peace, recently invited people to “sign on” to this letter about climate change. The effort was joined by IUCC’s Green Faith Team, which focuses specifically on Creation Justice issues. IUCC members and friends can receive invitations and information from the Advocates by requesting Steve Swope to add their e-mail addresses to: [Advocates@iucc.org](mailto:Advocates@iucc.org). Folks interested specifically in green faith topics can join an e-mail list by letting Green Faith Team chair Chuck Heath know. David Smith chairs the Advocates.

January 31, 2021

Hon. Joseph Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States [Contact Us | The White House](#)

Hon. Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator [www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/e-mail-me](http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/e-mail-me)

Hon. Alex Padilla  
United States Senator  
B03 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Hon. Michelle Steel  
Member of Congress [Contact | Representative Michelle Steel \(house.gov\)](#)

Hon. Katie Porter  
Member of Congress [Contact | U.S. Representative Katie Porter \(house.gov\)](#)

Hon. Lou Correa  
Member of Congress [Contact | U.S. Congressman Lou Correa of California \(house.gov\)](#)

Dear President Biden, Senators Feinstein and Padilla, and Representatives Porter, Correa and Steel,

**RE: CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN EXISTENTIAL PRIORITY**

We write as citizens living in Orange County, California, concerned about climate change, and as members and friends of our Irvine, California, United Church of Christ congregation that has formally adopted a designation as a Creation Justice/Green Faith congregation.

From a faith perspective, we endorse actions taken early in the Biden administration, including

- Rejoining the Paris Climate Accord;
- Cancelling the Keystone Pipeline; and
- Freeing up as much as \$10 billion at the Federal Emergency Management Agency to protect against climate disasters before they strike.

We write on the basis of an understanding of the world which includes the built environment, culture, economic and political activity, and all of humanity as part of God’s creation.

Our opinions are our own, and have not been formally endorsed by Irvine United Congregational Church (see [www.iucc.org](http://www.iucc.org)). At the same time, in June 2019 our congregation adopted a resolution to *recommit ourselves ... as a congregation to the intertwined responsibilities of caring for the environment and seeking justice for those experiencing human suffering due to the abuses of creation*. See [2019-SPRING-MEETING-Packet-6-2-19.pdf \(iucc.org\)](#), at page 30.

**We applaud efforts by the current administration to address climate change as an existential priority, and we encourage you to support efforts to preserve our planet.**

Sincerely,  
Keith O. Boyum, Ph.D.

And **19** other signers from Orange County, CA.

# A New Me?

by Vivian Elaine Johnson



I find myself having a bit of an identity crisis in the wake of my husband's death. Letting go of the man whose bones were intertwined with mine means letting go of part of my identity, that part referred to as "George's lovely wife." George was a leader, the person people quoted, the one who changed lives. He was the inspiring speaker, the author, the world traveler. He, the

important one, the one to whom my identity was tethered, is gone.

Mary Oliver, poet extraordinaire, wrote

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

Oliver says when the time comes to let go, let it go. My identity, the George and Vivian one, is in the past. In letting that identity go, I need to look deep within to find a new Vivian. I want to embrace this journey, this time of figuring it out. I will do some soul searching no matter how unsettling it may be.

What are my pleasures, my passions? I decide to start small, really small, with some new routines. Routines provide a sense of security; new routines give impetus for new life. I'm starting the day in a new way. In past mornings, I always got up, got dressed, and got going. I've decided on a new routine. As often as possible, I now luxuriate with morning coffee in bed. Sometimes I just sit, sip and think. Other times I read or write. I cruise, rather than leap, into the new day. I like it.

I also end the day with a new routine. I attempt no work tasks after 5pm, saving the entire evening for relaxation. I often invite a person or two to join me for a glass of wine on the patio (with distancing, of course). While I feel sad that George isn't with us, I become interested in my guest and use the opportunity to get acquainted, to deepen

friendships. I've had seven such occasions this month. I like it.

These new routines are satisfying and bring me pleasure. Now I'm ready to go beyond baby steps. I wonder if wanting and wishing are still reasonable at this stage of life. All my life I've had goals; is there a reason to be different now? I think not. What goals will I add to the map that resonate with the real Vivian? In my usual habit of list making, I start a new list.

The next day I looked at the list. The first item: *explore putting my writings into a book*. Did I really write that? This is a stretch for me. Is it realistic? I've had articles published, but my main role in terms of writing was to support George in his writing endeavors. Yet, this desire came percolating to the surface when I looked deep within. I squirm as I consider this goal. Yes, it is a desire, but am I capable?

I stewed. I fretted. Finally, I got the nerve to send samples of my writing to the editor of George's last book. Fast forward: I signed a book contract. The book is about my journey as a caregiver, titled "Love in a Time of Crisis." The subtitle will be something like "A caregiver's message of hope."

So, there you go. Part of my new identity is as a writer. To say I'm excited is an understatement. The moment of signing the contract is a memory that hangs in time, hangs like a drop of honey from a spoon - sweet and golden.



## Powerful Parenting

# Follow the Leader - or - Lead the Followers?

by Dr. Lorraine Fox



Since last we spoke, our country has experienced a monumental change: a change in leadership. I wish I could write that it was a change in health, which would also be monumental. However, since I can't wish you joy as you venture out into the world without your masks, and with people other than your family, I've had to find something else to

engage you while we wait for that glorious day. You can still go out for walks, or have nature tours of your yard, or study the behavior of your household pets to keep life interesting. Puzzle trading will remain in vogue for a while, as will playing old games and learning new ones.

Who knows how long it will be before parents can turn teaching back over entirely to teachers. With our future remaining uncertain for a while, I'm going to add to your curriculum for the year – something you'll be able to study without going to the library and in real time. We'll devote the parenting columns for 2021 to the study of *leadership*. With a slew of new leaders in the background of our daily lives we'll have the chance to watch and learn; listen and learn; and compare and contrast.

Let's start with the most unsettling truth of all about leadership: it is **not** about "good" or "bad." There are good leaders, and not-good leaders, just as there are followers who can be led into the good, others into the bad. As I write, people of differing political views have quite different opinions about the change in leadership we have just experienced. It is also true that our country is currently in the throes of overtly competing leadership forces – making headlines every day. Leaders aren't necessarily "designated," and we'll be watching both designated and self-appointed leaders for a while. This situation makes it an opportune time to focus our minds on issues of leadership as we watch "things" develop in the days ahead.

I'm going to invite you to engage your children in examining changes as they occur over the next little while, and help them to learn, as we all learn and review, about leading, and about following. Leadership issues among

children become evident as early as pre-school, so we don't have to wait for them to grow up before examining this interesting part of life in both human and animal societies. We can enhance our examination by bringing in stories and lessons from books, the Nature channel, Animal Planet, and PBS. Leading and following for all species is part of every day and has a **lot** to do with the quality of life.

This particular topic also lends itself beautifully to what is called "parallel learning." That is, while we examine our new leaders and compare them to our previous leaders, and while we help our children examine themselves (whatever age they are) in terms of their inclination to "lead" or "follow," we can simultaneously examine ourselves as parents and role models for children in terms of our own leadership styles and qualities.

For good and for ill, as the year progresses and current events unfold to determine our new history, we will have a multitude of opportunities to closely watch as some lead and others follow. We'll have the opportunity to notice our own internal responses to attempts by others to "lead" us, and by our personal inclinations to "follow" or "resist" following. As we use ourselves as laboratory rats during the experiment with new leadership on a national basis, we can also examine our children and how they respond to attempts by others to "lead" them, or by their attempts to lead others.

Every family is a replica of a mini-society. Every couple spends their initial courting days establishing who will lead who, and who will follow who, and how much each uses healthy behaviors in an attempt to lead, and how much each reverts to questionable techniques to get someone else to do what they want them to do. Some couples settle this early on, but others spend their entire relationship struggling with attempts to influence each other. You know who you are.

A year of leading and following. Let's see where this takes us.



# Healing Relationships

Reverend Dr. Jerry von Talge



Healing relationships can generate a high level of power for restoration and wholeness.

Our Comma Group is discussing the book, *A Bigger Table*, by John Pavlovitz. This is one of the most important things that the writer has to say:

*The church will thrive only to the degree it is willing to be about making space for a greater swath of humanity and by recognizing the redemptive power of real (authentic) relationships.*

Progressive Christians have difficulty embracing the idea of being redeemed from our sin through the death of Jesus Christ, especially as symbolized by the cross. I would prefer to see redemption as deliverance from bondage as described the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. There are many forms of personal bondage. We have been told that in the United States there is currently a mental health crisis as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. During our IUCC worship service on January 17th, Pastor Sarah prayed for our brokenness - personal, in our church and in the world.

Awareness is the beginning of tapping into the power of healing. Healing is part of redemption, the deliverance from bondage, including brokenness. Awareness, commitment, prayer and action actualize healing. We are blessed to be part of a congregation that is reflective and embraces a call to action.

Pavlovitz, in *A Bigger Table*, seeks to peel off all the artificial layers to recapture an authenticity in our relationship with Jesus, expressing his truth. He sees this as an ongoing, difficult, yet productive struggle.

As we come together as a congregation, let us boldly take on the mantle of redemption, being agents of redemptive healing. Mindful awareness of our mission will activate our ever-growing power to heal the brokenness in the world, little by little. We must maintain a redemption mentality, continue our commitment, and pray as individuals and as a congregation. Taking action, we know that everything we do is important because intentionality has its own power.

Believing in the redemptive power of real (authentic) relationships - our relationship with Jesus, our relationships with each other and our relationship with the world - we shall become an extension of Jesus' healing ministry, within our congregation and in the world. The pain we help heal can be physical, mental/emotional and existential. Existential pain includes lack of meaning, purpose, direction, quality of life, and lack of access to opportunity.

We are enabled by our relationship with Jesus. He heals us and lifts our burdens. Sunday morning worship empowers us as we seek a more authentic relationship with Jesus. We are further empowered by our "real" (authentic) relationships with each other.

Continually seeking authenticity and reaching out to each other, we can become a vibrant, healing community.



# Practicing Progressive Christianity

by Dr. Eduardo Jesús Arismendi-Pardi

Adult Education Ministries, and Diversity and Inclusion Task Force



The impetus for writing this article was an answer to a question I was asked by someone exploring Christianity: “What is progressive Christianity?” The person asking the question was only familiar with fundamentalist Christianity and Catholicism. Many of us, as progressive Christians, may have been asked such a question. In my response, I provided an answer

grounded on the *Eight Points of Progressive Christianity* (<https://www.iucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/January-2021-newsletter.pdf>). The question led me to reflect on what progressive Christianity means to me. I hope that in reading this article you will also reflect on what progressive Christianity means to you.

## **Point 1: Believe that following the path and the teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the sacred and of the oneness and unity of all life.**

I believe following the teachings of the historical Jesus allows one to experience the importance of service and being a servant leader within our personal, professional, and familial domains. Being a servant leader leads to spiritual transformation rather than secular conformation (cf. Romans 12:2). Following the path and teachings of Jesus suggests having the courage to challenge hegemony. A byproduct of this challenge leads one to experience sacredness, oneness, and unity of life. Belief and adherence to the teachings of Jesus is antithetical to the passive concept of salvation in the afterlife. The teachings of Jesus are about liberation from all forms of oppression.

## **Point 2: Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of the many ways to experience the sacredness and oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey.**

Learning about other faith traditions requires an open mind and a sense of humility. This experience can lead to a better understanding of our own spiritual journey in tandem with deepening our faith. The belief that there is only one way to experience the sacredness and oneness of life is religiosity, that is, a destination without a journey beset by questions, doubts, and struggles with faith. Spirituality from a progressive perspective is a journey without a destination. Our respective spiritual journeys are intimate and personal and as such are unboundedly divergent and without limit. For example, Laubach (2007)

alludes to how much his faith grew as a direct result of ministering to a Muslim community in declaring that “living in the atmosphere of Islam is proving—thus far—a tremendous spiritual stimulus. Mohammed is helping me. ... I find myself richer for the Islamic experience of God” (p. 3). The belief that there is only one way to experience the Divine is at the root of a cultic, rather than spiritual, religious experience.

## **Point 3: Seeking community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all classes and abilities.**

Inclusiveness regardless of who one is or where one is on one’s journey is grounded upon the words “Be hospitable to one another without complaining” (1 Peter 4:9, NRSV). The idea of inclusiveness within a 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective requires a broader understanding of gender beyond the 1<sup>st</sup> Century dualistic construct of male and female. The words “... God created humankind in his [her] image, in the image of God he [she] created them; male and female ...” (cf. Genesis 1:27, NRSV) suggests that God is a spirit inclusive of ALL people within a spectrum bounded between the duality of maleness and femaleness. A spirit is genderless and hence neither exclusively male nor exclusively female.

## **Point 4: Know that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of what we believe.**

As a progressive Christian, I believe that actions go beyond words and actions communicate what we believe. A belief is a passive construct; an action is the manifestation of a belief. Progressive Christians strive towards loving God and neighbor as ourselves (cf. Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27; 1 John 4:11). A neighbor within the context of Point 4 is anyone who is in need. The fullest expression of what one believes suggests a behavior that goes beyond the dualistic classifications of White-Black, male-female, gay-straight, servant-master, master-servant, me-them, and so on... Point 4 suggests our recognition of the Divine in others is directly proportional to the discovery of the Divine within us.

## **Point 5: Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than absolute.**

Progressive Christians are led by questioning and challenging fallacies and finding ways to identify and

“Practicing Progressive Christianity” continued on page 12

address mental trickery and manipulation. Absolutism is the antithesis of questioning and rooted upon “either/or” false dilemmas. The duality of absolutism robs a person experiencing personal and spiritual growth. Between the extremes of A and Z are options B, C, D, E, ... An exegetical examination of the gospel writers yields evidence that Jesus never gave straight answers to questions. Instead, Jesus responded with another question or with a parable leading those who asked to think for themselves. Jesus’s parabolic teachings can lead to questioning and introspection as well as deeper insights that surpass the duality of absolutism.

**Point 6: Strive for peace and justice among all people.**

The words “... What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NRSV) are at the root of progressive Christianity. Striving for peace and justice among ALL people may require risks on behalf of those who suffer, which is an illustration of living the words “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Matthew 16:24, NRSV). To strive for peace and justice means to resist anything that denies ALL people of their sustenance, dignity, and hope.

**Point 7: Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth.**

Stewardship is at the heart of Point 7 and calls one to protect and restore the planet, and to look after it with care. The verse “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it” (Genesis 2:15, NRSV) is a command to humankind to tend and care for our planet (i.e., the garden). The Hebrew word for “tend” is “shamar” (שָׁמַר) meaning to keep neat and tidy. To protect and restore the integrity of our planet means to “guard” and “watch” and “protect” the earth. Viewing the world as a gift from God requires us to do our best to take care of it and use it wisely, instead of poisoning or destroying it.

**Point 8: Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.**

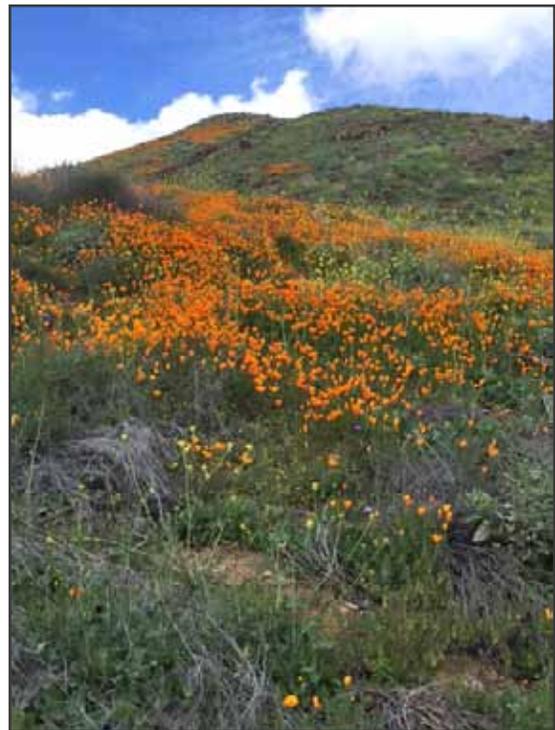
Commitment to life-long learning is one way to grapple with how new information changes one’s understanding of faith. Nothing is permanent; every field of study is in a constant state of flux. Hence, faith is not constant but evolving. The path to a life driven by compassion and selfless love is rooted in a desire to experience a profound connection of the Divine. This connection is antithetical to fear, greed, hatred, aggression, or self-importance and is

understood as the emptying of oneself by letting go of ego which can result in freedom from the bondage of *self*.

**References**

Laubach, F. C. (2007). *Letters by a modern mystic: Excerpts from letters written to his father by Frank C. Laubach*. Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design.

Plumer, F. C. (2012). *Study guide for the 8 points by which we define: Progressive Christianity*. Gig Harbor, WA: The Center for Progressive Christianity.



*Scenic photos in this issue courtesy of Tricia Aynes*