IUCC celebrated PRIDE Sunday on June 27 with a hybrid service inside our sanctuary!

Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes
Summer is in full swing and for those of us parents, that means we have to figure out what to do with our kids to keep them occupied, which is especially challenging when so many of them have been cooped up all year long. We’re constantly in search of pools, shady parks, or ways to get out of the house safely. My kids got a lot of time together throughout the pandemic, which can test everyone’s nerves. Whenever Mollie and Micah get in a fight, or a sibling spat, it’s often because Micah has mischievously done something. So Mollie says, “Tell me the truth, Micah, did you do _______ (insert offending action here)?”

The truth. She wants the truth. We want the truth. Of course she does, the truth shall set you free! We all know that, right? I think lots of us are in search of the truth: The Gospel truth!

In most churches that translates to the truest, truth of all. But if I think about my kids, I realize that because each of them has their own perspective, there really is no ONE truth. So I have to ask, “whose truth is it?” Each has their own truth, and it’s up to me as the parent to decide what really happened. So what is the Gospel Truth? Good question.

This summer we’ll dive into a new sermon series: “The Gospel Truth: Whose Good News is It?”

I think many Christians don’t really think about the differences between the gospels. They don’t realize that each gospel shares a truth from the writer and the writer’s perspective. So I think it will be fun to dive into our text and ask that very question and learn about the differences in the gospels, not only the ones in our Bible, but a few extra-canonical gospels as well.

I’m looking forward to a summer of exploration with you actually in the pews! The three in-person (two of those hybrid) services we have had have had been absolutely incredible. I cherish each time we gather, but I’m ready to see you weekly! We’re still committed to online worship so for those of you who aren’t quite ready to come back, or are not geographically close on Sunday mornings, we are learning how to do hybrid services with intentional presence to those who are physically inside the sanctuary and those who are part of extended sanctuary beyond the walls! While I can’t wait to see you, and share a vaccinated hug or handshake, I want you to know that those of you who aren’t present are just as important to us as those who have made it in. Thank you all for your patience over these long months. Your willingness to do church out of the box, demonstrates your ability to BE church!

So, we’ll keep doing out of the box ministry in and out of the dome as we finally begin consistently worshiping inside for our hybrid worships beginning July 11th and returning to our regular schedule the Sunday after Labor day in September.

As you embrace post-vaccinated life this summer and enjoy many postponed vacations, don’t forget you can join us wherever you are by experiencing our worships online! Can’t wait to see you!

Pastor Sarah
From the Administrative Pastor
by the Rev. Steve Swope

I want to start with a BIG THANK YOU to Wayne Banwell and Alex Ingal, who helped replace all the light bulbs in the sanctuary last month! Over a third are now LED, so we’ll have some energy savings, too.

A second BIG THANK YOU to Donnie Mineo and Julia Grace for tech-booth work on our two in-person services!

Now that we are doing live worship AND streaming it online at the same time, it’s a more complicated process that requires more than two hands.

That means we’re still working to get all the pieces just right – and we’ll keep at it until it’s just the way we – and you – want it. Starting July 11, we’ll get to fine-tune things every week, as we start **weekly in-person worship at 9:30 am**! And on September 12, we’ll bring back the 11:00 am service, too – with the Chancel Choir!

We continue to offer as much adult education as we can – and I’m grateful for the opportunities made possible by Diversity & Inclusion, Green Faith, and Women’s Ministries! Over the summer, we’ll begin to bring on-site, in-person activities back.

The Seekers and Tuesday Bible Study have already started in-person meetings (with a Zoom option). It’s so great to see “real people,” present safely! Keep watching for information in the Tuesday and Friday emails.

Tuesday Bible Study with Ken Wyant is wandering through the book of Genesis. Diversity & Inclusion is exploring Civil Conversations with Terry LePage on Thursdays this month. And the Wednesday Old Testament Study is moving through 2 Kings, probably concluding in August.

Next month I’ll have more information about Comma Groups, and perhaps even a Fall speaker!
From the Moderator
by Tricia Aynes

From the gorgeous rainbow-filled altar to Connie Jones’ beautiful piano accompaniment to Pastor Sarah Halversen-Cano’s spectacular and heartfelt sermon, it was an incredibly vibrant in-person celebration of PRIDE on Sunday, June 27. The quartet’s stunning rendition of the beautiful anthem “True Colors” made me cry - they sang with such heart and pathos! Worship Leader August Lobato spoke with such expression, clarity and authority that we couldn’t help but be spellbound. It was so uplifting to see our congregation gathering again and to experience some long-awaited hugs. We are on the way back, my friends, and this was a glorious step in the process.

I am in awe of our staff’s ability to switch gears yet again and create these very complex hybrid services - part live, part taped - and to blend them together so seamlessly. Once they’ve done it all for the 9:30 service, they have to do a quick pivot and combine all the moving parts again for the second service at 11 a.m. Special kudos to Steve Swope and Chris Peterson for working their magic!

IUCC deacons Craig Tyrl, Ken Wyant, and Christine Roy were busy welcoming everyone and encouraging them to sign in. Deacons look for ways to help out and always have a presence in the lobby to greet latecomers and keep an eye out for security. Then make sure everything is put away and locked up at the end. Our deacons are vital to the smooth running of our worship service, and we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to these reliable and devoted volunteers. We are always looking for new deacons, so please get in touch with Craig Tyrl if you would like to serve.

I’m excited to start working with our continuing and incoming IUCC leaders at our Leadership Retreat on Saturday, July 24. We were fortunate enough to secure Dr. Cedrick Bridgeforth as our retreat facilitator. Dr. Bridgeforth is a well-respected coach, consultant, strategist, educator, and Methodist pastor. He earned a Doctor of Education degree in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University. He is also the author of 20/20 Leadership Lessons – Seeing Visions and Focusing on Reality. He is a friend and colleague of Pastor Sarah’s and she has lots of good things to say about him.

We’re continuing with our re-opening process this month. Starting July 11, we’ll be conducting weekly in-person worship at 9:30 a.m. On September 12, we’ll bring back the 11:00 a.m. service, too, while welcoming our Chancel Choir back. Slowly but surely, we’re returning to some semblance of normalcy.

I do hope we’ll come back better than normal, though. If we’ve learned nothing else from this pandemic, we’ve learned how to be flexible and to adapt to new circumstances. We’ve stretched ourselves to “do church” differently and create an online presence that we never had before. We’ve managed to stay in touch with our fellow congregants by having Bible studies, church meetings, book groups and more via Zoom. While we had to shut the doors of our physical church for a while, we learned how to open the doors of our virtual church in a whole new way to reach many more people. It’s the wave of the future, and we learned how to surf! We need to build on that foundation and keep on learning and adapting.

Have you read the book Who Moved My Cheese? It’s all about realizing when the old way of doing things has reached its limit and it’s time to try something new. We may need to discard some of our old processes and consider new directions that keep us limber and able to respond more rapidly to changing times. We have a vibrant new pastor with some innovative ideas. We need to listen to her ideas and see where they take us.

Sure, we’ll make mistakes. But a wise friend recently provided a thought-provoking quote from author Daniel H. Pink that resonated with me: “Make excellent mistakes. Too many people spend their time avoiding mistakes. They’re so concerned about being wrong, about messing up, that they never try anything -- which means they never do anything. Their focus is avoiding failure. But that’s actually a crummy way to achieve success. The most successful people make spectacular mistakes -- huge, honking screwups! Why? They’re trying to do something big, but each time they make a mistake, they get a little better and move a little closer to excellence.”

Let’s be brave enough to risk making “excellent mistakes” and keep moving a little closer to excellence!

In hope and optimism,

Tricia
Almost two years ago, Marilyn Smith had an idea for a Women’s Fellowship book group. And like many things at IUCC, if you have an idea, you’re usually the one who gets to make it happen. There are a lot of women at IUCC who should be, or are, still thanking her.

That first book group, which centered on reading “Women Rowing North,” grew into a second group reading the same book a couple months later. But the first group of women, despite not universally “loving the book,” discovered that a couple of hours on Friday afternoons with new and old friends was something many of them didn’t want to give up.

And so, a whole series of Women’s Fellowship book groups were launched, with options for weeknight, afternoon and weekend meeting times and a choice of books. And when in-person meetings became taboo in March of 2020, the groups shifted to Zoom sessions and just kept going.

“We have found a safe and supportive ‘sisterhood’ in our group which has been very meaningful as many of our members have faced critical life changes and challenges – retirement and enormous stress surrounding the process, cancer and complicated jaw surgery, family challenges,” said Lorraine Fox, who helped organize subsequent sessions. “Our group has proved to be much more than a ‘book group,’ but we wouldn’t have gotten together without a book to provide structure for our meetings.”

Laura Long, another group organizer, called the book groups a real blessing at the height of the pandemic.

“We were able to share important ideas and experiences, offer concrete support and help to each other, and just be a boost to the mental state. Participation was always high. A big benefit was the opportunity to make new friendships. I’m pretty sure I would not have gotten acquainted with several of these wonderful women without the group.”

If you had dropped into any of the Zoom meetings I participated in or helped coordinate over the last 20 months, you might have found us talking about death, meditation and mindfulness, Maya Angelou’s amazing life, Sue Monk Kidd’s journey from Southern Baptist religion writer to novelist and feminist force for a more inclusive way of being Christian, or how to find a path to forgiveness.

We read one or two chapters a week – slow going for some and a relief for others with major time commitments – and we shared the discussion leadership from week to week. We talked about our own struggles, worries, joys, hopes, ways of coping and yes, even politics (it was election season for a long time). Perhaps one of the best moments came when Rachel Gregory was able to steer Sarah Wall to the information that would let Sarah’s brother, as a caregiver to their father, get a vaccine without having to wait for his age group.

Sometimes we disagreed with the authors or found their viewpoints confusing or limited. Did that stop the discussion? No, it did not. Nor did it stop the laughter and sometimes the tears that came with the stories shared about our own lives.

Book groups are just one way that IUCC women use to create a meaningful fellowship. Keep an eye out for additional Women’s Fellowship book groups and activities coming in the fall.

Photo: Taken at Laguna Niguel Park at our first in-person meeting of 2021. From left, Cindy O’Dell, Sarah Wall, Peggy Goetz, Anne Rosse, Robinmarie McClement, Rachel Gregory, Nancy Harris, and Nancy Parker. Missing, but in our hearts, Debra Banwell.
Diversity & Inclusion Dinner Outing

Are you curious about other people and their cultures? All are welcome to enjoy a nice Persian dinner at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, July 10, at the Hen House Grill in Irvine. The proprietor, Saeed, has graciously offered to spend some time with our party sharing his comments on the food, Iranian culture, and his immigrant experience. RSVP is not necessary, but it will be helpful to have a general idea of how many people might be joining us. Please let Craig Repp know at craigrepp@gmail.com or 949-463-0331.

We aim to do these outings as often as monthly, visiting the wide array of ethnic restaurants in Orange County. The idea, of course, is that more understanding will yield greater solidarity among the people in our community. If Persian food is not your thing, please join us and just order a drink or appetizer, enjoying the learning and the fellowship.

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Dangerous is the Night and Fateful is the Day
A racial justice poem

The Reverend Dr. Jerry von Talge
Member of the Diversity & Inclusion Ministry

dangerous is the night
another black youth killed in flight
another fateful day
for a white supremacy and white privilege another black his life must pay

endless grief and pain
another black teenager is killed again
protecting herself with a knife
the police cut short her life

Black Lives Matter makes it clear
why black families live in dread and fear
police see all black men as a violent and dangerous threat
George Floyd was murdered with no regret

i can’t breathe came to be a rallying cry for a large contingency
finally the public joined in solidarity
but victory was a short and bittersweet affair
three more blacks immediately killed and no one seemed to care

an elderly Asian is attacked and beaten senselessly
why are there so many crimes against the Asian elderly
racial justice looks so very far away
how do blacks, browns, and Asians make it through each day?

white power and white privilege have programed our minds
we must divest ourselves of stereotypical thinking of all kinds
implicit bias is underground
and microaggression does abound

but white allies must join the fray
we must follow because we do not know the way
blacks, browns, and Asian cannot do it all alone
their battles we must own

racial justice is the clarion call
it will benefit us all

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Civil Conversations

Is it a challenge to keep some of your conversations constructive these days? Is there sometimes more heat than light in the interactions?

We are enjoying a five-week exploration on having civil conversations, especially with those whose ideas differ from our own. We gather on Zoom on Thursday evenings from 7:00 to 8:15 p.m. We are using a video curriculum from the Episcopal Church called “Make me an instrument of your peace” on their ChurchNext platform. Each session includes two short videos, each followed by discussion on the topic presented. Our first session was delightful. Join us when you can for the rest! Email Craig Repp in order to get the Zoom link each week and any attachments with related materials.

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Service Opportunities with Congregational Care

The Congregational Care Ministry is the hands and heart of Jesus for our members in need. We specifically need people to:

- Visit, call, or write to those who are unable to come to church due to illness or injury.
- Provide rides to church or appointments when other transportation is not available.
- Prepare and deliver meals on an occasional basis in times of hardship.
- Knit a prayer shawl for members with special needs.
- Help with memorial receptions.

If you are willing to help provide concrete care for IUCC members in time of need, please let us know the ways in which you are willing to provide support. We would also be glad to talk with you if you have questions.

Kathi Smith kspittsy@gmail.com or Diane Rust dianerust@gmail.com

Mission & Service Ministry Opportunities

For the past several years, our Mission and Service Ministry has been proud to support Families Forward, among the highest rated programs for the homeless in the United States. They use their donations efficiently and transparently, and they’re located right here in Irvine!

You can help in one of two ways. We are collecting food for them. The list of most needed Items is short, according to Mike Lopez, Outreach Coordinator for FF:

- Pasta Sauce
- Canned Fruit
- Canned Vegetables
- Peanut Butter

The other way is to help with our School Supply Collection. See the following list for the most needed items. If you are so inclined, you can fill a backpack with supplies. Note: The School Supply collection ends July 22 to give Families Forward some time to assemble the backpacks for the students.

- 17-inch Backpacks
- Binders
- Colored Pencils
- Dividers
- Glues Sticks
- Sharpies
- Highlighters
- Index Cards
- Lined Paper
- Rulers
- Protractors
- Zippered Pencil Holders
- Thick & Thin Markers
- Scissors

Please donate what you are able. It means so much to low income students and gives them a chance to start out on an equal footing with their more prosperous peers.

Thank you very much from Mission and Service!
Volunteers Wanted for MYP
Connect & Make a Difference with IUCC Children & Youth

Vacation Bible School is coming in late summer! We invite volunteers who want to help plan, conduct activities, or just sit in and spend time with the kids.

There are all kinds of ways to help! You can teach Sunday School, sit in and watch the kids, have fun as a chaperone, act as tech support, share event ideas, work an event, organize or participate together in service projects...we would love to have you!

Want to learn more or ready to jump in? Email Lauren Louie.

The Seeker’s Women’s Group
Tuesday, July 20, 9:30 a.m.
Off Site

The Seekers will meet in person this month at the 19th Hole Restaurant in Laguna Woods. They’ll be back at IUCC in August and meeting in one of the new rooms.

Life is returning to normal and we are overjoyed to revive an IUCC summer tradition.

Enjoy a free Pacific Symphony concert while having social time and fun with your IUCC friends. Join us at Mike Ward Community Park, Woodbridge (just 2 blocks north of IUCC), with your low-back beach chair; hat, cap, or visor; a side dish or dessert to share, your cutlery and plates, and beverage of your choice. Chicken will be provided by the Membership Ministry.

With a potpourri of popular classics, pop tunes and patriotic tunes, the concert is led by Music Director Carl St. Clair and the audience is invited to participate in a sing-along of patriotic favorites.

Family activities and local music acts begin at 5:30 p.m. Arrive between 5 & 5:30 pm. The concert starts at 7:00 pm. Look for our IUCC area close to the stage. We will have two red balloons tied to a beach chair, red tablecloths on the ground, and IUCC signs in the grass.

Please sign up by emailing tommiek@cox.net and advise your potluck dish or dessert. We will want/need to know how much space to reserve.

For more information, music program and children’s activities, go to https://www.pacificsymphony.org/education/community_concerts
How many churches do you know that actually CELEBRATE Pride?

by Karolyn Fencl

Reprinted with permission from her Facebook post on June 27, 2021

How many churches do you know that actually CELEBRATE Pride?

Irvine United Congregational Church became the first Open and Affirming church in Southern California 30 years ago: the full and equal welcome of all persons of the LGBTQ+ community. Not the “tolerance of...,” as in “love the sinner, hate the sin.” But a true living, breathing belief that we are all God’s children, created in his image and worthy of his love.

Growing up gay in Orange County during the 80’s and 90’s was difficult. There was a lot of fear and prejudice that one had to navigate to avoid trouble. I found myself having to constantly explain my existence, sadly seeking the approval of countless others who were quick to condemn me to Hell, to tell me I was making a choice to be that way, or that it was “God’s test” that I was failing. I watched my friends reject an idea of a loving God after being terrorized with selective doctrine. I started to question myself, and determine how much control I really had over who I was. I’ve experienced gay-bashing; mostly verbal, but even some physical. I’ve had people I love question me, families of friends and partners reject me, and an absurd amount of unwanted and assertive male attention that I was told would “fix me.”

I experienced Pride for the first time when I was 19: a weekend event with a parade, food, music and dancing. There was always the army of religious zealots that would show up with their anger and hate... and no shortage of Pride-goers who met them with the same loathing. But inside, the energy was high-spirited and full of fun and expression. I was gratefully surprised there were so many other gay people in the nearby world, but I was also interested in the businesses and organizations that weren’t afraid to be there in support. To have felt so different and alone, the experience made me feel human. Of course, then I found myself having to explain to others why we “need a parade,” and “why is there no straight pride weekend.”

But I still had to contend with the zealots; or at least those who claimed to be biblical experts and translators who could speak on God’s behalf (but only on this topic, of course). I did some research on my own to some satisfaction, but finally had to reject the homophobia hidden in these pious pretenders, and make peace with what I knew to be true in my heart: God loves me. Imagine my joy when I found a church that whole-heartedly believes the same! Pastor Sarah’s beautiful words summarize what many of us have endured on this same journey.

Editor’s Note: I was so impressed with Karolyn’s Facebook post that I asked her if we could reprint it in the newsletter. As Ken Wyant wrote in the comments, “Your affirmation is profound and courageous.” I think we can all agree with him on that! Karolyn serves as Clerk of the IUCC Ministries Board. We are so glad she found a home at IUCC!
PART THREE: Racial Justice - I’ve Got a Lot to Learn
by Vivian Elaine Johnson

Following the African trip mentioned in last month’s essay, I accepted a position as a school counselor in an inner-city school in the Minneapolis area. There, I often learned the story behind children who were labeled as “misbehaving.” As an example: A sixth-grade Black boy was angry at everyone and everything, causing his teacher to send him to me. After several sessions with him, I learned that he witnessed the killing of his mother by his father. With his mother dead and his father in prison, Kenny lived with his beloved grandmother. He was angry because he had to go to school. What he really wanted to do, at twelve years of age, was to be allowed to work so he could help his grandma with finances, but he had to go to “dumb old school. It isn’t fair!” I assured Kenny that I understood his anger and that his disadvantages were unearned by him. I suggested that an education was to his advantage and that he might be able to get a part-time job as a teenager while attending school. Mainly, I tried to give him hope.

People of color have been some of my greatest teachers. For a healthy physical body, I can’t limit my diet to white bread. For a healthy mind and spirit, I can’t limit my relationships to people who are white like me. I’m coming to believe that some of the most deprived people are those who haven’t been outside of their insulated, privileged, and exclusive bubble of existence. They are deprived of knowing people different from themselves. Such lack of exposure to the difficulties and challenges others face, limits our development of character and certainly excludes the development of community.

Just as I appreciate it when men speak to other men on behalf of women’s equality, I’m learning that an effective way for me to combat racial inequality is to talk to other white people about the importance of justice for people of color. That is, to share my story, my failures, biases, and inadequacies, my need to learn and understand. To share how I’ve learned that people of color have tremendous talent, smarts, compassion, love, perseverance, and every good that any other race has. And that they certainly don’t have a corner on violence or laziness as they are sometimes viciously and falsely portrayed.

Whites benefit from policies established in the past plus some contemporary ones: housing, loans, school, job opportunities, and voting accessibility. We have been privileged without realizing it, privileged even if we’ve been poor.

Many people of color report that they suffer stress when they leave their homes. They know not what awaits them while in their cars, walking down the street, in a store or work place. A mixed-race friend of mine is cautious and on high alert every time she walks into a room of all white people. She is well educated in a profession that receives high respect. Yet she wonders, Will I be accepted? Will I be seen as representing all people of color? Will my intellect be secretly questioned? Studies have shown that when people such as my friend experience the stress of discrimination, they are more prone to depression, fear, hopelessness and general ill health.

Some whites say that they haven’t done any harm to people of color so it’s not their fault that there is injustice. Author Debby Irving reminds us in her book Waking Up White that “it is possible to be both a good person and complicit in a corrupt system. No matter how good a person you are, if you can’t see a system for what it is, how can you step in and be a part of the solution?”

I heard a metaphor that addresses the comment “I didn’t cause systemic racism so I don’t need to do anything to correct it.” Let’s say that I bought a beautiful Victorian house. I loved its beauty but discovered after living in it that it had plumbing and electrical problems. I didn’t cause those systemic problems, but they are my problems now and I need to deal with them. Likewise, we live in a beautiful country that has many issues of injustice that we contemporary people may not have caused. Nevertheless, they are the reality.

To claim to be apolitical or neutral in the face of systemic racism is actually a political position that upholds the status quo, and is on the side of oppression. We need to face systemic racism and correct it if we want to live in a just society.

One of the great blessings at this time of my life is that I am privileged to have people of color in my immediate and extended families through marriage and adoption, and among my physicians and other professionals. Also, they are my neighbors, and – hallelujah – they are in my church. (To be continued next month.)
Since California has given us permission to begin to resume our customary lives and habits, we’ve been considering the fact that a crisis such as the pandemic health crisis actually prohibits us from picking up our previously “normal” lives. By its definition and nature, a crisis changes us. Sometimes coming out of a crisis surprises us in that we find we have learned some things about ourselves that change us in positive ways. Other times our post-crisis self is diminished in some ways, and we find ourselves unable to pick up and resume our previous styles of coping. This is true for both adults and children.

In the past few columns I have been urging you, my dear readers and lovers of children, to pay focused attention to those in your care as they emerge from pandemic living. What do you notice about them is the same as it ever was? What are you noticing that is different? Are you discovering some residual effects from the lack of familiar routines and social contact that indicate that your child or teen will need some extra support in the weeks or months ahead?

Last month we began our discussion of differences in “resiliency” in coping with difficult events, resulting from differences in external situations and internal strengths and sensitivities. When a storm impacts our lives, the first task for a person or family is to assess the damage. We don’t know how to make a plan for repair until we carefully assess what has happened and what needs to be done. Kids are not like kids; they are like themselves. Research has revealed that differences in resiliency are more important to long term effects of crisis and trauma that the actual event a child experiences. (This is also true for adults.)

Here are some of the ways kids are different from each other.

- Kids have different kinds of relationships with their parents, their siblings, their teachers, and their friends. Differences in qualities of relationships often contribute in very significant ways to how well they are able to handle stressful events and situations. *Kids have different levels of maturity for their age. Kids who are more immature need more overt help and support in learning how to cope in effective ways with challenges.

- Kids differ with regard to how many stressful events they have experienced in their lives. Stress – and “crisis” is defined as a form of stress in which normal coping strategies prove insufficient – takes a toll on emotional, mental, and physical well-being. Kids with “histories” of previous stress and/or crises will need more attention and support than kids for whom the pandemic was the first situation of crisis they experienced.

- Kids are physiologically different from each other. Some kids have health issues which compromise their physical bodies; others are physically stronger.

- Kids live with different kinds of parents. Some parents handled the stress of the pandemic much better than others. Some drank too much; others exercised a lot instead. Some prayed for strength; others lost their tempers and became frazzled. Some couples pulled together and formed a strong bond with each other and a strong team for their kids; other relationships couldn’t manage the strain and fell apart. Some parents were kind and understanding with their kids; other parents blamed their kids for “acting like children.” Some families have money and suffered inconvenience but did not suffer financial strain; other families endured enormous stress and strain over finances. (During a “lockdown,” parents were not successful at keeping too much “secret” from the kids.) Some families were able to enjoy or create a successful “pod” of loving and supportive people – family members, neighbors, and friends – who provided outlets for frustration resulting from too much closeness and isolation. Other families were more isolated and too much on their own and were left feeling drained and cranky.

These are some examples of “external” features that contribute to gifts of resiliency or deficits in resiliency. Next month we’ll talk about “internal” features of resiliency. External features affect each of the children in some way, while internal features require a more careful assessment of each individual child. Keep your eyes and hearts open as we continue assessing the troops.
The reason for my writing about Critical Race Theory (CRT) is because for Open and Affirming (ONA) Progressive Christians, it is important to have a basic understanding of what CRT is. In addition to understanding what CRT is, in my opinion, it is important to learn how to dismantle the fallacious arguments about CRT that are being presented by Christian fundamentalists and rigid/inflexible political conservatives in an effort to uphold an agenda antithetical to the teachings of the historical Jesus and in support of minimizing the seriousness of White supremacy, racism, misogyny, and hatred.

This article provides an explanation of what CRT is and how it relates to progressive Christianity. Before delving into CRT, it is important to recall U.S. General Mark Milley’s testimony on June 23, 2021, before the U.S. Senate. General Milley stated that “It is important for members of the military to be well read.” He then stated that he had read Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, and Vladimir Lenin, and vehemently concluded that reading these works did not make him a Marxist or a communist.

Those who espouse a divisive agenda grounded on racism and White supremacy have used the tool of deception by creating a counter argument grounded on the four principles that most fallacies are dependent upon: (a) Something is true if “I” believe it; (b) Something is true if “we” believe it; (c) Something is true if “I want” to believe it; and (d) Something is true “if it serves my vested interest” to believe it.

In my opinion, CRT is directly related to the eight points of Progressive Christianity (see next page) in general, but more specifically to the sixth point, which is to “strive for peace and justice among all people.” The word “justice” in that clause is, in my view, related to Critical Race Theory. 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) is 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 their sustenance, dignity, and hope. The fundamentalist arguments against the teaching of CRT are antithetical to learning about the particulars of racism and White privilege. One cannot challenge oppression and injustice without understanding its manifold forms and manifestations. Education is at the core of liberation and emancipation.

Critical Race Theory assumes that racism and White supremacy are the norms in U.S. society. CRT scholars use a plethora of performative, storytelling auto-ethnographic methods to uncover the ways in which racism operates in daily life. In his testimony, General Milley alluded to his desire to dismantle White supremacy as evidenced by his remarks that he wants to understand White rage and how the power differential led to define an African American as 3/4 of a human being. CRT focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply imbedded within the framework of American society. Racism and White supremacy have, in many ways, shaped what the U.S. is today.

CRT has three main goals: (a) To present un-appropriated narratives or stories about discrimination from the perspective of people of color through interviews and by using a number of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods; (b) Eradication of racial subjugation while recognizing that race is a social construct; and (c) Explore other areas of disparity such as gender, class, and any inequity experienced by individuals. In general, CRT challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color by offering transformative solutions to racial, gender, and class subordination in our society and institutional structures. Like liberation theology, CRT has many links to Marxism. Liberation theology is a body of knowledge that yields a praxis that pertains to standing in solidarity, as progressive Christians, with the oppressed. Moreover, liberation theology means emancipation from every form of modern servitude, oppression, and persecution. Dismissing liberation theology as irrelevant because of its link to Marxism is, in my view, an example of human stupidity which is one of the greatest social evils that lurks.
within issues and ideas that are complex and have no easy solutions.

As activists, as progressive Christians, and as those who follow the teachings of the historical Jesus, I believe that it is important to keep in mind that human stupidity is the supreme social evil. Three factors make it so. First, the number of stupid people is legion. Second, most of the power in business, finance, diplomacy, and politics is in the hands of more or less stupid individuals. Third, high abilities are often linked with serious stupidity and in a manner that the abilities shine before the entire world while the stupid trait lurks in deep shadow and is discerned by only intimates or by those who probe and ask questions.

Yes, it is true and no one can deny that CRT has its roots and foundation in Marxist and neo-Marxist models, and the same is true for liberation theology. Should we not read something that may have some value or something that we may not completely agree with or is antithetical to the status quo just because of its links to Marxism and neo-Marxism? I believe that there is some value in most things we read. Critical Race Theory scholars argue that Whites have been the main beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. We live in an age of globalization and diasporic, post-national identity, and the color line should no longer be an issue, but sadly, it is.

The best way to dismantle the fallacious arguments opposing the teaching or learning about CRT is to keep in mind the following example of an *Either/Or* argument. These types of arguments create a false narrative which forces one to choose between two equally unsatisfactory alternatives. As an example, consider the following claim: “either we are going to lose the war on terrorism or we will have to give up some of our traditional freedoms and rights” or “you are either for us or you are against us. You either support democracy and freedom or terrorism and tyranny.” Only a fraction of the populace would actually see the false dilemma with an observation like “but these are not our only choices because in between the extremes of A and Z are options B, C, D, E, F, G, ... etc.”

Finally, progressive Christians and activists or those seeking to fight evil systems that oppress others are in the best position to resist agendas antithetical to the teachings of the historical Jesus by simply taking some time to learn about any and all issues that could potentially affect people in a negative way. As activists, as progressive Christians, and as those who follow the teachings of the historical Jesus, I believe that we have a responsibility to learn about Critical Race Theory.

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The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity

*By calling ourselves Progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who...*

1. **Believe that following the path and the teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;**

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;**

3. **Seek 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;**

4. **Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;**

5. **Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;**

6. **Strive for peace and justice among all people;**

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

8. **Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion and selfless love.**
I’ve been thinking a lot about confirmation bias these days. The dictionary defines it as “the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories.” We humans have a strong tendency to seek out TV shows, newspapers, and media that supports our preexisting prejudices and opinion. It’s why people who are conservative gravitate towards Fox News while people who are liberal will turn on MSNBC for their daily dose of commentary. Both sides want to see coverage that is slanted towards what they already believe.

Many believe that this practice of confirmation bias exacerbates the divisions between us and makes us more prone to demonizing each other. It rips at the very fabric of our democracy, robbing us of the middle ground. It clouds our sense of reality and makes it difficult for us to make well-informed political decisions.

Social media sites have algorithm filters that track our likes and dislikes and feed us more of the same. They “feed” us articles that they have determined we’ll click on time and again. Sometimes it’s innocuous (why yes, I WOULD like to look at some cute kitten videos), and sometimes it can be quite intrusive (like when I do a Google search of a Disney ride and moments later ten Disneyland ads pop up on my screen). I try to avoid posting anything political, but when I do, I start to see more memes in agreement with the views I’ve expressed. The upshot is that we can end up in a strange sort of loop where all we see are things we like, and almost nothing that we don’t.

Confirmation bias isn’t harmless. It can lead to flawed decisions because we can become so attached to our beliefs that we fail to “see the forest for the trees.” People can become so hyper-focused and sure of their beliefs that they literally shut out any evidence to the contrary. A homicide detective may decide on a suspect’s guilt too soon and ignore evidence that points to a different perpetrator. A scientist may be blind to new discoveries because she has selectively interpreted or ignored data that conflicts with her hypothesis. “There’s none so blind as those who don’t want to see,” says an old proverb.

I’ve been wondering lately if confirmation bias is even more insidious than we think. If we already believe something good or bad about another person, it’s very easy for us to look for behaviors (real or imagined) that confirm our opinion. If we dislike someone, we are likely to scrutinize everything that person says and does with a jaundiced eye, looking for additional reasons to support our already low opinion of them. On the other hand, if we love someone, we’ll do everything we can to ignore negative traits as long as we can so we can continue to hold them in high esteem. We humans have an amazing gift for rationalizing away things that don’t fit into our preconceived notions about others.

Confirmation bias can distort the views of those who are already hurt and wounded. In their pain, they may take offense where none is intended. There’s a sort of PTSD that comes from past bad experiences that can lead victims to scrutinize all encounters for signs of ill intent. When it’s found (as it surely will be, given the thoroughness of the search), the perceived slight merely confirms what the person suspected all along. And it goes downhill from there.

What’s the answer? Sadly, the human tendency for confirmation bias is very strong. It’s helpful to keep our critical thinking skills well-honed and close at hand. We need to practice self-analysis and ask ourselves if what we’re reading and hearing makes sense – if it holds up to the light of day. Run questionable stories through a website like Snopes (www.snopes.com) to determine if they’re true before you hit “share” and spread the biased story even further. Try to avoid biased TV news sources – instead, watch reliable and unbiased news sources like NPR and Reuters. We need to check ourselves frequently for ways in which we need to keep an open mind.

As Christians, I think it’s especially important for us to be mindful of our tendency towards confirmation bias when it comes to our relationships with other people. We can all make an effort to be less critical of others, to stop assuming the worst about them, to be more vigilant about seeing the good in them and not the bad.

Pastor Fred Plumer used to do this amazing thing when we were all standing and holding hands at the end of the service. He’d have us turn to the person on our left, and then the person on our right. He’d ask us to look for Jesus in their eyes. We did look, and we did see Jesus there. Especially after this long year in quarantine, let’s all try to cut each other a little slack. Everyone’s social skills are rusty, and we’re likely to offend each another without meaning to. Can we make a resolution? Let it go. Forgive. See Jesus in their eyes. Because there’s a little bit of him living on in all of us. We just need to look a little closer.