Our Christmas Pageant on December 19 was full of stars

IUCC’s youth, adults, and choral interns hosted a pageant during both services on Dec 19th. Our pageant would not have been possible without Myrna Bohan, Pageant Director and Writer, for our sweet “Night of Stars” play and our choral interns, Wendy Wiebach, Jocelyne Ramirez, and Jaime Reza, who led the kids, taught them the carols, and helped them with their lines. MYP is extremely grateful to these superstars for helping everyone shine! - Lauren Louie

Photos courtesy of Pastor Sarah, Cindy O’Dell & Tricia Aynes
To celebrate the second Sunday of Advent on December 5, we had an Advent Workshop, a chili cook-off, a snow run and a concert!

Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes, Alex Ingal, Lauren Louie, & Pastor Sarah

Our Advent Workshop on December 5 included an inviting cookie decorating station with Terry LePage, special fillable ornaments with Myrna Bohan, a dazzling crayon stained-glass craft with Sandy Exelby, as well as IUCC’s classic orange and clove ornaments (Steve Goetz and Blackburns), card making station, and paper chain table. Everyone got to see the snow come in and then have a blast.

Extra special thanks to master Alex Ingal of Hospitality for being the brains and major mover for our chili cookoff, offering a drink station during the Advent Workshop, and setting up the spread for the Choir Concert. The winner of this year’s chili cookoff was Harley Gimarino (pictured at right below and at middle below accepting the trophy from Pastor Sarah). Runners-up were Greg Furtado and Robbie Arevalos (a tie). - Lauren Louie
Snow Run & Choir Concert Photos!
Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes, Alex Ingal, Lauren Louie, & Pastor Sarah
Winter Congregational Meeting
(hybrid - choice of in person or Zoom)
Sunday, January 30, at 12:30 p.m.
Zoom log-in for this meeting and the Budget Forum will be provided in e-blasts sent the week preceding each meeting.

IUCC will be conducting our annual Winter Meeting to approve the 2022 Budget and consider Bylaw Amendments (see below). In order for us to conduct this meeting, we need a quorum of 25% of corporate members. Per our Bylaws, there will be a Budget Forum a week before the Congregational Meeting to answer any questions:

Budget Forum via Zoom
Sunday, January 23, at 12:30 p.m.

Bylaw Amendments to be considered:
Per Article 16 of the IUCC Bylaws, any amendment to the bylaws requires congregational approval. The IUCC Bylaws may be found in the “Bylaws, Policies & Procedures” tab at http://iucc.org/portal/documents/. We ask for your consideration and approval of these proposed amendments, which have been endorsed by the Administration Board.

Sub-leadership roles within ministries and committees
To support the creation of meaningful roles for our youth and manifest IUCC's commitment to inclusivity while nurturing future leaders, we recommend the creation of sub-leadership roles within ministries and committees. These sub-leadership roles will help build a pool of future leaders while providing our youth and other members with a safe space to build skills and experience. To support these new sub-leadership roles, we recommend the following bylaw amendments (proposed text designated in red):

ARTICLE 11 MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH
Section 1 General Duties of the Ministries
C. The Chairperson of each Ministry shall:
1. Be a member of the Ministries Board. If the Chairperson is unable to attend a Ministries Board meeting, he/she is responsible for assuring that the Ministry is represented at the Board meeting by a designated Ministry member, who is a Corporate Member. Such a designated member shall be a voting member of the Ministries Board for that meeting.
2. Prepare a written report of the Ministry’s activities and accomplishments for the year for inclusion in the Annual Report to be presented at the Spring Congregational Meeting.
3. Be responsible for recruiting members of that Ministry, being mindful of IUCC commitment to inclusivity, desire to create meaningful roles for our youth, and need to nurture future leaders through the creation of sub-leadership roles (e.g., vice-chairs). Each chairperson shall present the sub-leaders’ roster at a Ministries Board meeting for endorsement and recording in that meeting’s minutes.
4. Accept responsibility for overseeing expenditures according to the approved budget for the Ministry.

ARTICLE 12 COMMITTEES OF THE CHURCH
Section 1 Entity Formation and Structure
A. Standing Committees
1. Standing Committees may be formed by action of the Membership, through a bylaw amendment.
2. Except for the Nominating Committee, Chairpersons of Standing Committees are to be elected to a one (1) year term by the Corporate Membership at the Spring Congregational Meeting and shall be responsible for appointing members of the Standing Committee, being mindful of IUCC commitment to inclusivity, desire to create meaningful roles for our youth, and need to nurture future leaders through the creation of sub-leadership roles (e.g., vice-chairs). Each chairperson shall present the sub-leaders’ roster at an Administration Board meeting for endorsement and recording in that meeting’s minutes.

Non-corporate member definition
We recommend one additional minor amendment. For congregational meetings, we use the term “non-corporate member” to indicate youth members who can vote on all matters other than financial. The term “non-corporate member” does not appear in our bylaws. Given its common usage, the bylaws should be amended to include it. The proposed text is designated in red.

ARTICLE 3 DEFINITIONS
Youth Member: A Member who is a minor, as defined by the State of California. Also known as a “Non-corporate Member.”
Non-corporate Member: A member who is a minor, as defined by the State of California. Also known as a “Youth Member.”
Happy New Year!

The sentiment on social media was “Good Riddance 2021!” We started last year thinking it couldn’t possibly be any worse than 2020, yet we entered the year and Covid numbers shot quickly to their highest levels and the death toll climbed. And even though it wouldn’t be long before we’d get vaccines, 2021 just kept throwing more at us as variant after variant hit, ending the year with numbers higher than any of us would have predicted.

And while I agree it was a hard year, and Covid isn’t kind, I can’t help but reflect on all that we managed to do despite the challenges we faced. With all of 2021’s obstacles, we sure managed to pack a lot into it! I relished my self-given title of “Vaccine Queen” and made it my personal mission to ensure you had access to vaccines the second you were eligible and would pull every string I could grab to make sure you got an appointment! We pulled off a drive-thru Ash Wednesday with “Ashes on Demand” where I literally brought ashes to your home! We had an intentional Lenten series, a Youth Sunday, and a fun and educational summer series. Actually, we got to celebrate Christmas twice, with Christmas in July and its traditional date in December!

While we’re in the middle of a rebuild, our Ministry with Young People is thriving despite transitions of leadership and a lack of staffing. I heard some say it was our best Trunk-Or-Treat yet, not to mention our first Spooky Sunday! And what about that Christmas Pageant? Amazing!

We celebrated 30 years as an Open and Affirming Church with rainbows, rainbows everywhere! We came back with a bang – with personalized masks that might have hidden our smiles but couldn’t mask our joy! And we all came Home for the Holidays with a heck of a celebration with one of our best Advent Workshops in years complete with a snowy white winter wonderland, a hot chili cook-off and a packed house to listen to the sounds of the season with our chancel choir! We ended 2021 with the miracle of Christmas and a fun challenge to live into it each and every day of the year.

So, while so many are eager to put the year behind us, I think it’s worth reflecting on all we managed to accomplish together as we lived out what it means to do and be church.

And now I’m dreaming of what’s next! Our Strategic Planning Task Force has met twice a month examining our past, and clarifying goals for our future. When I think of what we managed to do together during the hardest year most of us can remember, I’m confident that whatever 2022 has in store for us we’ll meet it together with love, joy, hope, commitment and creativity!

I hope to see you in church (or for you to see me online). Remember you can always connect with us and watch our livestream or catch our services throughout the week. Stay safe, be intentional in your choice of gatherings this month, and know that we’re here to support you!

Happy New Year!

Pastor Sarah
As we enter a new year, I want to express my thanks to all those who participated in adult education in any way in 2021! In spite of pandemic-imposed limits, we were able to continue with a number of programs and events including:

- Book studies on diversity and women’s spirituality
- Speakers on diversity, climate issues, and progressive theology
- Comma Groups and weekly Bible study
- Series from Bil Aulenbach & Pastor Sarah and Craig Repp & Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi

So a sincere THANK YOU to the leaders, the planners, and the participants! Covid didn’t stop us!

My thanks also to Nikhil Strasma for helping in the tech booth on a busy, short-handed Christmas Eve!

Now, what’s up for 2022? A lot! Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi will begin the year by leading a four-week survey of liberation theology on Sunday mornings at 10:00. This will be followed by four weeks on the writings known as the Apocrypha with Craig Repp. And that’s just for starters! Tuesday Bible Study continues, as Ken Wyant braves the sometimes confusing pathways of the book of Genesis. Join him at 4 p.m., either at IUCC or online.

Adult Sunday School and Tuesday Bible Study are both offered in person at IUCC and online; check the weekly email updates for links to the Zoom session. Pastor Sarah and Bil Aulenbach are planning a coordinated Lenten series – preaching and study – on Bishop Spong’s book Unbelievable in March and April. You won’t want to miss this! All in all, I’m excited about 2022, and I hope you will be, too – excited enough to participate like the proverbial Chicago voter, “early and often”!

Now I’ll switch hats and say a word about our facilities, particularly the anticipated Patio Cover. While the support posts have been in the ground (very visibly!) for weeks, it will be a while yet before we see the sail-cloth covering. In mid- to late-January, the remaining supports should be installed (brackets just below the roof line on the preschool building). Then it will be a few weeks before the sail-cloth pieces arrive – but once they do, final installation will take just a day! - Pastor Steve

Over the past almost two years, we’ve had many moments as a faith community to reflect on what it means to be a church, or as Pastor Sarah says, “how to do church.” We’ve come to some new understandings about the meaning of that phrase - we can gather together virtually and still worship, still meet, still connect with each other; we can contribute to the life of this vital community of faith by supporting the programs and activities of IUCC by giving of our time, talent, and treasures (albeit not always in person); and we can be “brothers and sisters - siblings - in Christ no matter where we are or who we are with. Those are powerful, and perhaps comforting, thoughts during these challenging times. One of the ministries of IUCC, the Membership Ministry, plays a key role in how we do church. Its tasks are:

- to provide “Visitor Hosts” to greet persons at our Sunday services
- to be responsible for the recruiting and orientation of new members
- to work closely with the various boards and committees of IUCC to invite new members into the life and mission of our church

As we begin the new year, I hope you’ll think about how YOU can WELCOME, RECRUIT, INCLUDE visitors, friends and members to our beloved community of faith. JOIN THE MEMBERSHIP MINISTRY TEAM - let Renae Boyum know that you are interested in this exciting endeavor!

Renae Boyum,
Membership Ministry Chair
renaeboyum@gmail.com

This beautiful photo of IUCC at sunset was taken by Pastor Sarah
Happy New Year, church family!

We’ve just completed another very busy month at IUCC. On December 5, IUCC celebrated the season with an Advent Workshop, a chili cook-off, a snow run, and a lovely concert featuring our own Chancel Choir. It was a joyous, fun-filled day!

There have been some changes in IUCC leadership. When Treasurer Mark Allen resigned, Chuck Heath was gracious enough to assume that important responsibility. He was approved by both boards. Because that transfer meant he needed to vacate his Congregational Representative seat, the Coordinating Council recommended Cesar Sangalang to finish his term. Cesar was approved by the Admin Board. We had been without a Membership Chair for some time, and the Coordinating Council recommended that Renae Boyum be approached to move from her position as Fund Development Chair to Membership Chair. Renae was open to the idea and agree to the move so long as the Fund Development Committee was left in capable hands. Duane Vajgrt and Linda Haghi agreed to serve as co-chairs to complete her term, and they were approved by the Admin Board. The Ministries Board approved and welcomed Renae as Membership Chair. I am so pleased and grateful to these awesome people for their willingness to step up and assume additional responsibility for the good of the church. Please join me in thanking them!

IUCC learned of an opportunity to submit a grant proposal to the California State Nonprofit Security Grant Program. There wasn’t much time to prepare, but we were able to arrange for a Threat Mitigation Officer from the Irvine Police Department to come to our facility and point out our vulnerabilities. Using his suggestions, I wrote a narrative proposal and Pastor Steve gathered as much information as he could on the costs of items we’d need to address those vulnerabilities. We are hopeful that the state will grant us at least some of the funding we requested to enhance security.

This interaction led to some dialog with Irvine’s Threat Mitigation Unit, and IUCC was invited to attend a recent “lunch and learn” event to learn about hate crimes and hate incidents against houses of faith. I was happy to participate and made some good contacts within that group.

I continue to work with the Fund Development Committee on strategies to enhance stewardship. Pastor Sarah and I collaborated on a special end-of-year donation request letter which all of you should have received last month. I followed that up by recording a video appeal which aired during both services on December 19.

I continue to work with the Child Care Committee as well. Committee members helped out with the preschool’s holiday pageant on December 3 by providing a warm welcome to parents as well as some crowd control at the front door. Each class had its own separate program to ensure optimal protection against COVID, and we needed to clear the sanctuary between programs to avoid overcrowding. Committee members also attended the preschool teachers’ appreciation dinner on December 10 and provided decorations and a nice meal.

Under the leadership of Chair Cesar Sangalang, the Strategic Planning Task Force continues to meet twice a month to develop goals and plans for the future. Pastor Sarah and I are involved as ex officio members, and Pastor Steve is serving as facilitator. We are exploring the challenges that our church is facing and seeking to identify strategies that will help us navigate through the next few years.

Please mark your calendar now for our upcoming Winter Congregational Meeting on January 30 after second service. We’ll be hearing about the progress of the Strategic Planning Task Force and voting on the 2022 budget. We can’t conduct the important business of this meeting without a quorum, so your attendance is especially important!

We’ll be trying something new for us - a hybrid Congregational Meeting with both in-person and Zoom attendees - so there’s really no excuse not to come. Please attend via whatever method works best for you. Thanks for taking part in the important business of IUCC!

In hope and optimism,

Tricia
Save the Date! One Day Women’s Retreat

IUCC will hold a one day Woman’s Retreat on
**Saturday, March 5, 2022**
at the Norman Murray Community and Senior Center
in Mission Viejo.
Details will follow soon!

“And now let us believe in a long year that is given to us, new, untouched, full of things that have never been, full of work that has never been done, full of tasks, claims, and demands; and let us see that we learn to take it without letting fall too much of what it has to bestow upon those who deemed of it necessary, serious, and great things.” - Rainer Maria Rilke

Happy Birthday

Mission & Service Ministry

**Orange County Human Trafficking**
Mission & Service Collection

Here is your opportunity to help victims of human trafficking with a collection we are sponsoring during January via the OC Human Trafficking Task Force (OCHTTF). Through OCHTTF, victims of human trafficking undergo training to re-enter society. The graduates of this program need very basic items that are listed below. We hope that you are able to contribute to our collection bins. Bins will be available outside the sacristy from 10 to 4 Monday through Thursday and on Sunday mornings during services beginning Sunday, January 2 through Friday, January 28. Many thanks from your Mission & Service Ministry!

- laundry detergent
- toilet paper
- toothpaste
- shampoo/conditioner
- sheets (single twin-size)
- fleece blankets
- towels

Adopted Families from Families Forward
The Mission & Service Ministry thanks all the donors of gifts and gift cards during this Christmas season. Without your help, the 15 children of the 4 families we adopted would not have received presents, nor would the parents have experienced the joy of giving them to their children. Everyone in the families each received a gift and a gift card.

**Concern America**
Sandra Dones of Concern America sends her regards to IUCC after having had a successful sale of fair trade arts and crafts on December 5. IUCC purchased $1,071 of fair trade goods!
Everyone was thrilled to meet Santa, who was a really good sport to take part in four separate holiday programs PLUS take pictures with everyone afterwards! - Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes & Pastor Sarah

Here’s the jolly old elf (Craig Tyrl) with Pastor Sarah and our preschool staff (middle above), our Moderator Tricia Aynes (top right), Pastor Sarah and Micah (below left), ECC Director Irma Rosales and Pastor Sarah (below middle) and Pastor Steve and Pastor Sarah (below right). It goes to show you’re never too old to take a photo with Santa!

Linda Heath & Jim Aynes were in charge of the door

Linda Heath, Irma Rosales, and Tricia Aynes
We continue our theme of building resilience in children and teens as we continue as a world to struggle with a pandemic that has been defining our lives for a long time and in many ways. Although we have just passed into a “new” year, at least for now it appears to be an extension of the old year. Non-compliance with science-defined ways to maximize our safety and health has us continuing to wear masks, avoiding large gatherings, worrying every time we don’t feel well, and worrying about the emotional and social development of our children. Research on children’s well-being is supporting that this is a legitimate concern. With all of this in mind, we are going to continue another month with our consideration of the powerful need for people of all ages to belong. Last month we focused on how holidays provide opportunities to reinforce belonging with families; this month we’ll consider the role of friends in meeting this important need.

We know that some of the worst emotional impacts of the last two years of social isolation resulted from the closing of schools and the resulting loss of contact with friends for many young people. We know that even for adults, a circle of caring and supportive friends makes all the difference in coping with difficult circumstances. It is one of a parent’s primary responsibilities to provide opportunities for friendship, as well as to teach their children about friendship. For me, one of the most important “lessons” is how to choose for quality, rather than just quantity. When parents are gone, many longtime important friends will remain. When young people leave their parents’ home, lessons about how to choose quality friends will follow for life. When surviving the loss of a life partner, friends will carry one through.

For parents of teenagers, experiencing the “shift” in loyalty from parent to peers can be difficult. I’m thinking about a good friend of mine who heard her teenage daughter talking on the phone and became very upset. It was a long discussion, full of high emotion. When her daughter finally hung up the phone, my friend approached her to ask what was going on and how she could help. She reported feeling devastated when her daughter replied that she “didn’t need to talk anymore because she had just talked everything over with her best friend.” Until then, my friend had considered herself her daughter’s “best friend.” She was not thrilled to hear from me that a parent should not be a child’s “best friend.” Adolescence is the time when young people begin to move toward more intimacy with their peers, which is a very important life task. The ability to create and sustain intimacy with peers will form the second layer of a strong foundation to help keep one steady when life gets rough. It will also provide an opportunity to establish intimacy between equals, which will be very important when establishing a romantic relationship.

Initially, friends are “supplied” by parents depending on the neighborhood, school, church, interest groups, etc. that parents choose or allow their kids to choose. During this time, parents will monitor friendships to determine how well their child is doing at being a friend, and perhaps have some important talks about how to be a good friend. Parents will set standards for choices in friends while they are “in charge” of who their children hang out with. Later, we hope their children will continue to set standards for who will count as a friend. How long parents have to be involved in monitoring their children’s friends depends entirely on how well their children show the ability to choose healthy peers. When getting a job, learning how to be a good friend will support the ability to be a healthy, well-adjusted “colleague” when it’s time to work cooperatively with others.

Without a strong circle of people to close in around them when they need support and strength, people can make destructive choices to help them cope with difficulty, like drugs, alcohol, unsafe sex, etc. All of our children have learned early that life is not predictable, and that “bad things happen to good people,” like a pandemic. You can use this unfortunate pandemic experience to help them learn the beauty of having friends - good friends - to “belong” with, lean on, and share life with in good times and bad.
We met Dennis when we were living on top of a hill in San Bruno, CA. He had a pale, almost translucent face encircled with loose curls of red-brown hair that wandered down his neck. At nine years of age, he was the eldest of four children, and while he had an innocent – almost angelic - appearance, in actuality he had an instinct for trouble. Our three children lived in bewilderment and occasional fear of Dennis.

While I visited with Dennis’ mother one day, his father returned from work. Unaware that I was in the house, he roared in and yelled at each child. This was a common scene, I suspected. He screamed for his wife and entered the room where I was seated with her. He looked astonished but gave nary a word of apology, just a grunt before stomping out of the room.

One day our family went on a picnic. When we returned, we discovered that our basement window was broken. The chaos in the basement playroom made it evident that someone had been in our home. Exploration by our children unearthed evidence that led to Dennis.

That evening Dennis’ mother came dragging him up the hill to our front door. With a firm grip on his shirt collar, she shoved him in through the door, announcing, “Dennis has something to tell you.” My knees shook from anger with this delinquent nine-year-old. I recalled all the times he had been responsible for upsetting our children. And now this.

“Dennis,” I felt anger rising in my sternum, “You need to talk to my husband. He’s downstairs in his study. You’d better go down and see him.”

Dennis’ lips trembled. Color fled his face, making his freckles more prominent than ever. He bit his lower lip as I pointed to the stairway.

Dennis started down the stairs, paused, and glanced back over his shoulder at his mother and me standing at the top of the stairway. She stood with arms crossed over her chest, closed to his agony. My arms hung like poles with fists at the end. Our mouths were rigidly set. Dennis found no sympathy from either of us.

Slowly he completed his descent and stood before my husband’s closed office door. Withdrawing a hand from his pants pocket, he timidly knocked on the door. A strong, firm voice came from behind the closed door, “Come in.”

Dennis opened the door. Using a sleeve, he wiped sweat off his forehead, then took one step into the room. In the strained silence, we could hear him take a deep breath. “What is it, Dennis?” George asked, not unkindly.

Dennis whispered, “I ... I ... br ... broke ... your window.”

With a frown, George looked at him and demanded, “Come here, Dennis.” At that command Dennis’ eyes filled with large tears and his mouth quivered uncontrollably, but he obeyed, inching forward.

George reached out with his long, strong arms, wrapped them around Dennis, and enveloped him in a hug. Dennis, like a limp doll, sank into the outreached arms. After many silent moments George whispered, “That’s okay, son. You’re forgiven.” Relief swept across Dennis’ face. He looked up the stairway and into the tear-filled eyes of two women - two who no longer condemned him.

That evening, George confided to me that as a young boy he and a friend threw rocks and broke street lights on Main Street of the small Iowa town where they lived. He never forgot that he was scolded harshly and was threatened with being sent to a reform school. He empathized with Dennis. For the next several weeks, Dennis arrived at our door with an envelope filled with coins - his effort to pay for the broken window. Each time, we thanked him for being a responsible person.

Shortly thereafter, we moved to another state. I often wondered what happened to Dennis. Did he remember the neighbor man who treated him with kindness and forgiveness? Did that one positive intervention make a difference in his young life? I want to believe it did.
I always think about my Aunt Kathryn at Christmastime. She was a formidable woman who loomed large in my young life. Twelve years older than my mother (her sister), she stepped into something akin to a grandmother’s role when my own grandmother passed away. Her financial circumstances were in sharp contrast to ours: she had married a wealthy entrepreneur, while my mother had married a working class guy with a limited education. It was a strange dynamic to have in the family.

I wish I’d had a better connection with Aunt Kathryn, but I was very intimidated by her because my mother was so in awe of her. My mother used to say her elder sister was “to the manor born,” a paragon of impeccable manners and style who was always held up to me as a shining example of what a lady should be (“Eat as if Aunt Kathryn was at the table,” and “Clean the house as if Aunt Kathryn was coming over”).

While it’s true that my aunt could be controlling and a bit of a terror, she was also amazingly classy and elegant, with a regal presence that belied her small stature. She and my uncle were world travelers, and when they’d return from a trip, she would invite us over to see the hundreds of slides they’d taken of all the places they’d seen. She took copious notes of everything she’d learned from the guides, and she’d use them to provide a colorful narrative to accompany the slide presentation.

Aunt Kathryn and Uncle Waldo lived in a gorgeous custom-built house on top of a hill that overlooked Los Angeles. Her favorite colors were purple and yellow, and she loved roses and butterflies. Her living room had an enormous picture window through which we could see a panorama of hundreds of twinkling lights shining from the city below. Her house was decorated with ornate velvet couches, beautiful oil landscape paintings, and gilt-framed mirrors that reflected huge crystal chandeliers. To my child’s eyes, her home was like a magic fairyland castle. It wasn’t until I visited Versailles many years later that I realized what her inspiration must have been.

While Aunt Kathryn didn’t have much use for my mother, she liked me. She’d take me with her to visit her many friends. They were really nice to a shy and awkward little girl. One of them was a dear lady who gave me two exquisite little glass slippers from her what-not shelf. It led me to collect them for many years.

Aunt Kathryn really loved to give gifts on important occasions, and she did so with abandon. She kept track of all our big days, and I don’t think she ever forgot my birthday until she grew very old and her memory failed. I wrote thank-you notes to her for everything, and the practice served me well. Her generosity meant I learned a hundred ways to express appreciation for someone’s thoughtfulness.

She was especially known for lavishing presents on her family at Christmastime. What was remarkable was that she never treated me any differently than she did her own grandchildren. All of us would get about six Christmas gifts each from her every year: a combination of clothes, toys, jewelry and decorative items. She must have shopped for months to acquire such a large quantity of items, and the presents were carefully chosen and tasteful. We’d gather at her lovely home every Christmas Eve and open one beautifully wrapped package after another. It was an extraordinary experience for a child being raised by very frugal parents on a tight budget – a child who would otherwise have gotten only the necessities.

Two such gifts stand out in particular, and I treasure them anew every December as I open my bins and decorate for the holidays. One is a Christmas stocking that Aunt Kathryn made herself: a masterpiece of felt shapes covered in colorful sequins. The other is an intricately hand-carved manger scene she brought back from the Holy Land. Both are precious to me beyond measure.

While I had great regard for my aunt, I was never entirely comfortable with her. Looking back, I think that’s a great pity. I wish I’d known how to bridge the gap between us and be closer to her, but I’m afraid my mother’s own complicated issues with her sister stood in the way of that.

So when I unpack her handmade Christmas stocking and the beautiful manger scene, I think of Aunt Kathryn and her important role as an unintentional mentor. Her presence in my life was a gift in itself. Without meaning to, she provided an example of grace and generosity I might not have been exposed to otherwise. She opened my eyes to a world that was beyond my limited experience, and her influence was profound. She died of Parkinson’s Disease in 1995 at the age of 87. May she rest in peace.
Liberation theology came to fruition within the broad body of theological constructs as a result of being in solidarity with the process of emancipation of oppressed people in Latin America. The process of liberation is one that is centered in the redemptive work of Christ. This redemptive work allows open and affirming progressive Christians to challenge all forms of servitude, oppression, racism, and socio-economic injustice.

Liberation theology in its simplest definition is a process that leads progressive Christians to practice and be led by the message recorded in the Bible which is liberation from oppression. In other words, liberation theology has its emphasis on the poor and the oppressed as evidenced in the numerous stories of human struggle depicted in the Bible. Liberation theology rests on the message of Christ and on His teachings. The focus on the poor as per the message of Christ is not because the poor are morally or religiously better but because poverty is a form of servitude and death as a result of lack of health care, education, employment and exploitation of workers. Liberation theology advocates for the struggle to level the playing field by bringing about equity and equality. Challenging the status quo for advocacy of basic human needs such as shelter, healthcare, education, and adequate working conditions is very much in line with what I believe the Historical Jesus would advocate for. The focus on the poor is grounded in bringing a New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, into humanity. In my view, worrying about the afterlife is an exercise in futility. I believe that as open and affirming progressive Christians, Jesus calls us to focus on the present and do all we can to bring the Kingdom of God to those who suffer by giving us courage to be led by these simple concepts: do no harm and exercise the practice of loving our neighbor as ourselves and to be led by compassion.

Finally, I hope that you will contemplate whether or not there is any value whatsoever in the concern about social justice and addressing inequity and inequality from the writings of Marx or Guevara in contrast to others such as King, Bonhoeffer, and Gandhi who addressed human concerns by using non-violent means. In my view, and as the aphorism states, “two wrongs don’t make a right” is something that should be contemplated to gain further understanding of human struggle through the lens of liberation theology. Is there any spiritual value drawn from the concluding sentence “working men of all countries, unite!” found in the Communist Manifesto? Perhaps such a sentence for unification and solidarity can be viewed from an open and affirming progressive Christian lens and be reconstructed to be “Christians of all countries and traditions, unite under the redemptive power of Christ and by using his teachings of love to address inequity, inequality and oppression to bring spiritual harmony to a New Jerusalem described in the Book of Revelation.” Can one be a Christian revolutionary and be a Christian led by the Excellence of Love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)?

I am personally challenged by the concept of liberation theology because of its link to controversial persons such as, for example, Karl Marx and Dr. Ernesto Ché Guevara de la Serna, M.D. Liberation theology allows us to address the call to provide hope to the hopeless that are oppressed due to their lack of privilege and power. I believe such a call must be a non-violent call to action. The goal of liberation theology is to give a voice to the voiceless in the struggle to challenge all forms of oppression and servitude, in other words, emancipation. As a progressive Christian, I am troubled with the method employed by these controversial persons in their efforts to achieve emancipation because these methods have often included an armed struggle and the use of justified violence. Unlike these controversial persons, I tend to gravitate towards addressing the same concern from a progressive Christian perspective grounded in non-violent means. One way to deviate from a theology of liberation in its link to the controversial persons aforementioned, in my opinion is to follow the examples of love and non-violence espoused by spiritual leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I am hoping that you will be able to deeply reflect about the construct of liberation theology and what that construct means to you and how it may be incorporated as one practices the teachings of the historical Jesus in its link to the meaning of love, compassion, hope, empathy, and justice.
I believe that we have a serious White racial literacy problem in our nation, beginning with myself. There are a lot of good people around us and in the nation. Think of the national response to Floyd George’s death on May 25, 2020. Even corporations showed a social conscience. Amazon pledged $10 million for racial justice, Google $12 million, Facebook $20 million, and Citi a whopping $1 billion. It was at Citi that an economic research team, led by Black economist, Dana Peterson, determined that the US lost $16 trillion over the last 20 years in GNP due to systemic racism.

It is my opinion that a lot of White people, and people of color, would do the right thing if they knew and understood what was going on, but most people are unaware of the dimensions and manifestations of race in America. Most White people are not aware of what it’s like to be Black, Latin X or Asian and living in America. We tend to live in a white bubble with limited contact with people of color, so we don’t know what they’re going through.

Up until the time that I joined the Diversity and Inclusion Ministry about a year ago, I really didn’t have a clue about White supremacy, White privilege or systemic racism. This was in spite of my past social activism. I didn’t know that slavery and colonialism are still affecting the way our society is structured - how we live every day. I didn’t know that the French gave us the Statue of Liberty because of the emancipation of slaves and that at the foot of the woman are broken shackles. However, the shackles of slavery still exist because of racial stereotypes and what they do to people’s lives, as well as an unlevel playing field when it comes to economics. I didn’t know what White privilege was, nor White fragility. Implicit bias and microaggression were not even in my vocabulary.

The legacy of slavery and colonialism: Slavery and colonialism were social structures built on a foundation of domination, power and control, exercised by White men of European descent. Each social system embodied a predatory nature. The definition of “predatory” includes harming others, and seeking to exploit or oppress other human beings.

In order to treat others badly, it is necessary first to see those others as subhuman, therefore making it all right to treat them in an inhumane manner. Slaves were treated brutally, with families torn apart. There were beatings and hangings of men and rape of women and girls. Colonists destroyed indigenous cultures with special schools for the children and confiscated native American land, forcing the Indians to live on reservations, which became ghettos.

White supremacy, with a confluence of factors, has created a wide economic gap between Whites and Blacks. White families have ten times the wealth of Black families, and they have an annual median income of $76,000, compared to $46,000 for Black families, a whopping $30,000 difference. Some important factors included the following: Slaves were brought back to work on plantations after 1860 for frivolous reasons; Land would not be sold to them; Lack of college acceptance; Lynching of 3,500 Black men; Powerful Jim Crow laws; Southern Democrats controlling the administration of the New Deal and the GI Bill; Burning of successful Black business zones in Tulsa and Black Wall Street; and Redlining Black geographical loan areas. The GI Bill excluded most of the 1.2 million Black veterans from receiving any significant benefits. All these things put Blacks at a huge economic disadvantage.

White privilege: White privilege, or white skin privilege, is the societal privilege that benefits White people over non-White people due to oppression, control or domination. In addition to the ones mentioned above, other White privileges include the following: (1) Whites are the dominant and default race, the standard and norm; (2) Whites have a more positive relationship with the police and do not have to be afraid of contact with them; (3) White children are favored by school authorities and learn about their race in school; (4) Whites do not have to think about race, whereas people of color must frequently think about race in order to navigate in a White society, and (5) Whites have more opportunities to get a better education, a better job, and live in a better neighborhood.

Implicit Bias: Implicit biases are biases below the surface that we are unaware of. They come from racial stereotypes, which are not only toxic but can also be deadly. Stereotypes of Black women as strong, hyper-sexed, or man-destroying are toxic. The stereotype of Black men being violent and dangerous, perpetuated by
sociologists for many years, can be deadly. This stereotype may be part of the reason why 1,000 Black men were killed by the police this last year. It is my contention that some police officers operate out of fear because of their implicit bias, which comes from this stereotype.

**White Fragility:** A book written by Robin D’Angelo, a corporate consultant conducting diversity training, discovered early on that employers, especially men, would often get defensive or even very angry, when she talked about race. Liberal men in particular, who considered themselves in favor of racial justice, would get defensive or angry because they felt that they were being made to look complicit in racial injustice.

**Double Consciousness:** W.E.B. DuBois, in his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), described the mental conflict of Black people, a conflict between their self-image and the “eyes” of a racist society, viz a viz stereotypes. The Black person must constantly deal with this conflict in order to survive with an intact sense of self-identity and self-worth. There is always the danger of internalizing the toxic stereotypes. Further, the Black person cannot have their own self-determined identity because negative stereotypes are almost always present. This concept has morphed into the idea of triple consciousness, adding a new dimension, such as gender or alternative gender identities. This is taking an intersectionality approach.

**Conclusion:** We have a lot of good people in our church. I believe that they would do the right thing if there was racial awareness because of racial literacy. I have a suggestion for how we might further racial justice. First, we must follow our minds – continually learning about race, with all of its dimensions and manifestations. Then, we must follow our hearts: when we have gained adequate racial literacy, then we should follow our hearts. Our hearts will tell us how we can individualize our unique contribution to the ultimate realization of racial justice.

The same dynamic applies to people outside our church. Part of our contribution to racial justice will be to participate in the increase of racial literacy, in addition to divesting ourselves of our implicit biases which contain toxic stereotypes. It all comes down to the reality that we are either a part of the problem or part of the solution.

(I want to thank Lesli Mitchell for special input on causes of the current wide economic gap between Blacks and Whites, moving beyond more simplistic explanations, which are usually offered.)

IUCC member Jenna Wadsworth McCarty is appearing in a show directed by fellow IUCC member Craig Tyrl. In a Facebook post, Jenna describes her show like this:

“Emergence: First Flight is my own healing story--at least one thread of it-- told thru art, poetry, song and prose. You may laugh and you may cry ... hopefully you won’t groan. I promise this will be a performance like none you have ever seen before. Many of you have watched as I’ve ventured into my own artistic expression and expansion of who I am, from blank canvases on beige walls to colorful collages on colorful walls. I am immeasurably grateful for the support and encouragement so many of you have given to me over the years.”

Here’s the link to the website where you can purchase tickets: [https://www.thewaywardartist.org/studio-wayward](https://www.thewaywardartist.org/studio-wayward)

Please note that theater rules require proof of vaccine.