IUCC to Receive $21,000 Security Grant

IUCC is happy to announce that we have been awarded $21,000 from the California Office of Emergency Services to take security measures to keep us safer in the event of a threat or attack. The grant came in response to a proposal we submitted late last year. With the help of a threat mitigation officer from the City of Irvine Police Department, we were able to put together the necessary information in record time.

As everyone is well aware, houses of worship and other non-profits across the U.S. have suffered terrorist attacks leading to injuries, loss of life, and damage to property. The State of California provided funds to address this threat and enable entities like ours to do a better job of protecting themselves.

In our application, we pointed out that because our church has a long history of taking stands for the oppressed, we are vulnerable to attack. Our pastors have always been outspoken in support of liberal and humanitarian causes, and our new pastor is a particularly visible spokesperson for the marginalized of our community. We were able to make a compelling case that we were deserving of funding to help us be more pro-active in addressing our safety vulnerabilities.

The threat mitigation officer came out and did a risk assessment of our facilities, including our preschool. He identified a number of necessary “target hardening” upgrades including:

- An electronic access control system with key fobs to enhance our ability to control access at entry points.
- Installation of bollards (cement barriers) to prevent a possible vehicle attack on the sanctuary.
- Hand-held radios to enhance communications.
- Enhancements to our lighting system to include an automated timer.
- An outdoor camera security system to enable a 360 degree view of the parking lot.
- A latching system for internal doors that would allow for lockdown in the event of an attack.
- A portion of staff time to monitor outside cameras.

While we planned to break the big news at our Congregational Meeting on January 30, we actually got “scooped” by the OC Register, who ran the story about local nonprofit grant recipients on the front page of its January 28 edition (with a color photo of Pastor Sarah)! We were very pleased with the publicity, which identified our congregation as “radically inclusive” and “open to persons of every age, race, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds.” Pastor Sarah and Pastor Steve are pictured at left pointing to the OC Register article.

IUCC was one of numerous nonprofit organization across the state to receive funding for safety measures designed to enable at-risk groups to strengthen their defenses. Recipients included synagogues, mosques, Asian-American nonprofits, churches, legal aid clinics, and Planned Parenthood clinics (among others).

While we hope these measures are never put to the test, we are grateful and relieved to obtain the funds to address some of our key vulnerabilities and provide additional security for our members, our visitors, and the families who use our preschool.

- Tricia Aynes, IUCC Moderator
I’m ready for February! Maybe that’s because we packed so much into January with 5 Sundays! Or maybe because the Omicron surge brought on so much worry as we adapted our worship and on-site programming. Or perhaps it was the work we all put into our annual meeting as we looked towards this new year. Or maybe it’s just that I’m excited for all February has to bring as we look forward to a return of our choir and some special services!

As I reflect back on our packed January, I am so proud of our services and the way we seamlessly responded when the surge hit. We started the month and year with a New Year’s service reflecting on all we did in 2021 with excitement about what 2022 might bring. While it was disappointing to have to pull the choir and coffee hour, we got creative with communion “to go” and we felt so thankful that our quartet of Dr. Chris and our Interns could so beautifully offer us inspirational music, while Sunday School quickly shifted to offer both an online and an onsite outside option. Epiphany was a fun day - I loved sharing the story of La Befana and her journey to follow the star. Covid really struck when both our guest preacher and liturgist tested positive, but we didn’t miss a beat thanks to all we’ve invested in technology, and we found the words of our special MLK speaker, Rev. William Summerville, to be almost as powerful on screen as in person. (And besides, most of our congregation was watching on screen anyway!) I had fun with Fresh Word wading in all kinds of water while remembering Jesus’ baptism! And it was fun to engage in a pulpit exchange with our sister church: Neighborhood Congregational UCC in Laguna Beach. What a month!

As we begin February, we’re thrilled to return to “normal” or at least our new normal as the choir and coffee hour come back! Barring another bump up (the numbers are trending downward), we anticipate the first Sunday of February will be filled with the sound of music and cookies, coffee and conversation on the patio! On February 13, we’re going to observe a favorite of mine: Evolution Sunday! What’s Evolution Sunday? Well, it evolved out of a clergy letter-writing campaign to affirm evolution as a response to those who argue for “Creationism” to demonstrate that people of faith do believe in evolution. It’s become an affirmation of science, and different congregations do different things (as you can imagine, I like to have fun with it). This is first time we’ve invited Dr. Kathleen Treseder of UCI’s Dept of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology to speak on her work and especially what it means for us in the midst of the climate crisis. Then our own Rev. Dr. Jerry Von Talge will take the pulpit to reflect on what it means to be a white ally working to be anti-racist. And then we’ll end the month with some festive fun for Fat Sunday, so wear your green, gold and purple for the celebration! You can see why I’m excited to begin this new month!

I really do hope that February will bring us a return to at least a semblance of normalcy. Many of us were relieved that we didn’t have to close our doors during the surge. We worked hard to ensure we could keep our sanctuary as safe as possible, so it could be just that: a sanctuary. But we know that some felt safer at home. I completely understand this and affirm again that this is why we have a hybrid ministry. That said, I do hope you’ll begin to feel safe enough to return. We’re still rebuilding as we refresh, reboot, and renew in 2022, and we’re doing everything we can to ensure we can connect with you in the way that you feel most comfortable. I hope to see you in church or on zoom soon!

May you enter into this month that is so often saturated with hearts, candy and flowers, and find yourself grounded in love! May the love of our God be reflected and celebrated in any of the many ways we experience it, not just in romantic partnerships, but also in family and friendship, in nature, in community and within ourselves. I’ll be entering this month particularly mindful of how I can be a reflection of God’s love and how I receive it as well as share it.

In love, hope, and gratitude,

Pastor Sarah
With the surge in Covid numbers caused by the Omicron variant, adult education was primarily online. Kudos to Ken Wyant, Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi, and Craig Repp for leading the learning amid changes!

Tuesday Bible Study will continue online-only for the present, as Ken leads about 20 stalwarts through the book of Genesis. Discussion begins at 4:00 p.m. each Tuesday; check your Tuesday email update for the Zoom information.

Adult Sunday School will stay in hybrid form – both in person and online – as Craig Repp begins a new series on the books of the Apocrypha – early, pre-Christian writings that Catholics and Orthodox consider “scripture” but Protestants do not. Meeting at 10:00 a.m. every Sunday, with Zoom info in the Friday email update.

Diversity & Inclusion has begun a new book study, reading and discussing *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* by Carol Anderson. Sessions meet online at 9:00 on Tuesday mornings or 7:00 on Thursday evenings. Email Terry LePage to join on Tuesdays or Craig Repp to join on Thursdays.

As of today, the Seekers ARE planning to meet at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, February 15!

Comma Groups have been reading and discussing brief selections from various progressive blogs this year. One of February’s readings may be thought-provoking for all of us, as psychologist Arden Mahlberg talks about prayer as participation. [https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/prayer-as-participation/](https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/prayer-as-participation/) You can “participate” in the conversation just by clicking on the link!

And “save the dates” for an exciting spring speaker! Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University and Co-Director of the Program on Historical Studies of Religion, will speak twice in March, on the 19th and 26th!

*The Economist* magazine called Jenkins “one of America’s best scholars of religion.” He has written 30 books, including *The Lost History of Christianity, Jesus Wars*, and *Crucible of Faith*, and writes a monthly column for *The Christian Century*, “Notes from the Global Church.”

His latest book is *Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval*, and that will be the topic of his March 19 lecture. The March 26 lecture will be on *The Lost Gospels: Myths & Realities*.

Jenkins’ lectures – with time for questions – will be at 10:00 a.m., one topic each Saturday, and will be available only online. Registration is available NOW at [www.iucc.org/register](http://www.iucc.org/register) - and you can sign up for one or both events!

March will also be the beginning of Lent, and Pastor Sarah will present a sermon series based on Bishop Spong’s book *Unbelievable*, as well as a Lenten study series with Bil Aulenbach. More details in future email updates!
Thank you, IUCC family! It was such a joy to see so many of your beautiful faces at Sunday’s Winter Congregational Meeting on Zoom! We more than qualified for a quorum, with over 80 members in attendance. You showed up, you paid attention, you cared, and you voted - kudos to each of you!

While I wish we could have gathered in person, it seemed prudent to do this meeting entirely online. As always, our aim is to get the work of the church done while keeping everyone as safe as possible.

**Thank Yous**

There’s always some risk involved when thanking folks by name - I worry that I’ll slip up and forget someone important! With that said, though, there are certain people who rate special mention in the gratitude department for their contributions to the congregational meeting’s success.

We couldn’t have conducted the meeting at all without the incomparable skills and talents of Administrative Pastor Steve Swope. He reminded all of us to submit our materials for the meeting packet, then assembled it in his usual efficient fashion and had it ready to go on time. He helped enormously by determining the quorum and running the voting process for the motions. I am always amazed at his ability to multitask so many things and stay calm and patient throughout! We are sure going to miss him when he retires at the end of May. What a gift he has been to our congregation.

We owe SO much gratitude to stellar human being Chuck Heath, who stepped boldly into the role of IUCC Treasurer in December 2021, taking the reins of an extremely complex and difficult job. He did so with tremendous grace and generosity of spirit, spending countless hours to get the 2022 Budget ready in time for the meeting. He provided a clear and easy-to-understand PowerPoint presentation of the budget for our consideration, and it was concise, transparent, and thorough. The man is a rock star for taking on this daunting task!

Pastor Sarah brought her usual zest and energy to the meeting process with a very comprehensive written report of all the things we managed to accomplish in 2021 (in spite of the challenges of the pandemic). She did a great job of presenting a verbal State of the Church too!

My heartfelt appreciation goes to those who answered the call to help the meeting go more smoothly: Don Bjorklund for serving as Parliamentarian; Karolyn Fencl for stepping up to take Minutes; and Ken Wyant, Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi, Daniel Blackburn, Renae Boyum, Felicity Figueroa, and Lauren Louie for making and seconding motions.

Thanks also to Anne Rosse, Chair of the Bylaws, Policies and Procedures Committee, and her team members Keith Boyum and Ron Steiner for crafting some necessary bylaw amendments. With their help, we approved two bylaw amendments to support the creation of meaningful roles for our youth and demonstrate our commitment to inclusivity. The amendments created sub-leadership roles for young people within ministries and committees to help build a pool of future leaders. A secondary measure provided a more comprehensive definition of “Youth Member” and “Non-Corporate Member.”

Much appreciation goes to Cesar Sangalang, Jr., Chair of the Strategic Planning Task Force, and Task Force members Cheryl Arismendi, Bil Aulenbach, Kelly Garrity, Linda Heath, Alex Ingal, Jon Ingal, and Sarah Wall for all their hard work in creating and developing the Strategic Plan. Thanks especially to Steve Swope for his expertise and organizational skills in serving as our task force facilitator and to Pastor Sarah, who was in attendance for most meetings as an ex-officio member and advisor. We had fun brainstorming ideas and engaging in visionary conversations about our hopes and dreams for the future of IUCC.

I hope everyone had a chance to review the Strategic Plan and think about its goals, objective, and strategies. If you haven’t, please do so! I think you’ll be impressed. We are excited to bring this plan forward and hope you will embrace it and make it a living document that will guide us through the next several years.

With the help and support of our wonderful members, we can bring about real change in our community and make IUCC a hub for Progressive Christianity in Southern California and beyond. Let’s do this!

In hope and optimism,

Tricia
Wayne Banwell recorded an ace, a hole-in-one, on the par three second hole at Rancho San Joaquin Golf Club in Irvine on January 27. His tee shot was from about 125 yards away.

Eyewitnesses included Howard Emery, Keith Boyum, and Bob Stalter. Some of us are greeting Wayne these days with "Hello, Ace!"

-Keith Boyum

Wayne Banwell (L) and Keith Boyum (R) on the golf course

**On the Golf Course**

**Mission & Service Ministry**

**FEBRUARY FOOD COLLECTION FOR FAMILIES FORWARD**

IUCC traditionally supports Families Forward a few times each year to support their food pantry. The harsh reality of hunger in Orange County is that 1 in 5 children are food insecure, unsure of where their next meal will come from.

Food donations are needed now more than ever. Families without housing are particularly at-risk during the COVID-19 outbreak. Let’s help to fill their shelves with the basic necessities!

This collection will begin Sunday, February 6 through Monday, February 28. Bins will be available on the patio Monday – Thursday 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. All food donations will be delivered to 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 in greatest need) Baby Wipes
- Hand sanitizers and disinfectant wipes Single use face masks

Thank you - Mission & Service Ministry

**Women’s Retreat Cancelled**

**WOMEN’S RETREAT CANCELLED!**

We regret to announce that the one-day Women’s Retreat planned for March 5 has been postponed until the fall, in response to the current surge in Covid numbers. Watch for more information about a date in the future!

**Happy Birthday**

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

-Keith Boyum
Dear IUCC Community,

I want to say thank you to you. Collectively and specifically.

It was 2008 when my family first came to visit IUCC. We’d come back from three years of service in Vietnam through the Mennonite Central Committee. We came back rather broken, me especially, and with a big wedge between us and church. Our relationship with church at that point was...complicated, far too complicated to explain here, but there was a confusing yearning to go to church paired with a resistance keeping me away.

Eventually, we gave in to the yearning for church and community, dragged ourselves past the resistance and showed up. I can count on my hands the number of times we came on time. I can count at least as many times that we drove toward church and then turned around and went home. (“We’re too late, too conflicted, too something that doesn’t belong in church.”) But there grew to be more and more times that we made it past the resistance and found our way into seats and sanctuary.

Every time we found our way into the sanctuary of IUCC, something happened in me. There was a softening. How many times did the message or songs stir something that caused tears to flow. I often had no idea why, other than the sense that I was coming home.

The resistance has remained over the years, but it’s lessened. I’ve learned more about the source of that resistance, rooted in guilt and shame and some buried conflicts paired with trauma that left confusion in their wake.

But IUCC became a place of love, acceptance, welcome for me. Paul Tellstrom’s messages washed over me, drew me in. As did the people.

I remember in the first month of Sundays we came to IUCC, we met Constance Cassady and Connie Jones, Susie and Dale Lang, Bill and Panee Hsiang. Matt and Jen and Hunter Mirmak. Lesli and Ernie and Ava Mitchell. Brian Pearcy and David Schofield. Felicity Figueroa. The list goes on and on.

Within that first month, Constance had convinced me to try out for choir, and Rob Istaad welcomed me in, telling me for the first time that I am a first soprano. I hadn’t been in choir since elementary school, so I didn’t know. I read music like a kindergartener and was a bit intimidated by the trained voices around me. But everyone was so kind. Connie Jones and Lesley Whelan let me lean in closer to them, following their notes by ear until the music sank into me.

We only had one car at the time, so I tried riding my bike to choir practice early on. Dean McCleskey and Lester Ricks took pity and offered for me to join their choir carpool, expanding the experience of love and acceptance to one of camaraderie.

I will always remember that first choir concert and all the nerves leading up to it. Rob grinned at my anxious gaze, squeezed my shoulder and recommended that I eat a steak to help my voice prepare for what seemed to me like impossibly high notes. It felt like throwing caution to the wind to catch those high soprano notes, and fear does not assist the voice.

After a few years of regular attendance, though, we disappeared. I was in a health crisis, barely hanging on emotionally or mentally, and my physical body finally collapsed, forcing me to withdraw from most of life. We stopped attending, because I couldn’t. I had to heal, and the healing went so deep and so wide that I pulled back from most of life for a time, hunkering down to survive.

Years passed, I grew healthier and stronger, but there was a wedge between me and church again. This time, I knew that the wedge was in me: it was a wedge that included shame for disappearing, not being able to be there over the years. For failing to overcome and be strong sooner. I felt guilty for not being there, for missing out on all the life and struggles that everyone else had been living. But I’d learned also that those feelings of guilt and shame don’t always speak truth. And finally, the longing for our church community became stronger than the resistance against it, and I came back.

I remember the first time back in that Sanctuary, I cried heaving sobs. I don’t know who saw me, but there was nothing I could do to hold back the flood of emotion. The
music, the message, the people, the place. It all just enveloped me and the walls came tumbling down. Susie Lang came up to me, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Welcome Home.”

John St. Marie and the choir gave me the chills, and Paul’s messages were so spot on, inspired. I didn’t want to miss a single Sunday. Paul called us to be who we are called to be, to share our gifts. And I had heard that call specifically already, a call to share the art I’d been making and songs I’d been writing. So, I told Paul my idea of an art exhibit in Plummer Hall.

It was Paul’s retirement year, and he left before the exhibit, but Steve Swope helped me find the way. Summer of 2019, I had my first art exhibit and gave my first talks. Craig Tyril came to the exhibit, and we’ve been working on crafting a new performance since then.

On Feb 12 & 13, that performance comes to stage at The Wayward Artist. IUCC has been one of those integral parts of my life, a safe place to expand and grow, sharing who I am, empowering me to step out of the shadows and onto a stage flooded with light.

I’d like to invite you all to come to the show. It’s called Emergence: First Flight. Come celebrate Emergence with me, a story of transformation and transcendence, a journey of expansion of healing and belonging. I’ve learned to sing my own songs, write my own lines, tell my own story. This performance is the first of hopefully many.

We all continue to change. I’ve changed, as has IUCC. Pastor Sarah Halverson-Cano now offers the first welcome, draws us onward. Chris Peterson now directs the choir, leading new songs. We shift and grow.

In the meantime, thank you all for the welcome, the safety, the love, the acceptance. You didn’t know what was going on inside, but you held space and opened your arms nonetheless. Thank you.

With love,

Jenna Wadsworth McCarty

For more details about the performance, please visit https://www.thewaywardartist.org/studio-wayward

---

**New Adult Sunday School Class**

Apocry-what?!

With most of us coming from Protestant backgrounds, the Apocrypha is something we may never have encountered. Or perhaps we have seen it as an extra section in some Bibles, separate from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament. Those of us from Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox may be familiar with it, but it’s just always been part of the Bible.

The collection of ancient texts known by Protestants as the Apocrypha is full of:

1. Enlightening and entertaining stories (you’ll be amazed!)
2. Histories that help us make the connection between the Bible and what we learned in school, e.g., Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, etc., and
3. Even more wise sayings than we find in the Bible.

During the month of February, we’ll be taking an overview look at the Apocrypha and looking more closely at some of the gems found therein. We’ll learn where these writings came from, why they are not included in Protestant Bibles, and how they’ve influenced a lot of our understandings of the biblical world. We’ll even learn where such a strange word, apocrypha, came from.

You won’t want to miss it! The class will be led by Craig Repp from 10:00 – 10:55 on Sunday mornings in February. We’ll be doing it in a hybrid fashion, so you are welcome to join in person or via Zoom. Look for the details in the Friday update from Steve.

- Craig Repp
The weariness with the mental and physical suffering resulting from a medical emergency and a stubborn refusal from many to do what is necessary to contain it continues. All these months later, it is still hard to think about writing about something else, especially because the news lately does contain something “new.” There is incontrovertible evidence that the mental health of our children and young people is suffering mightily and in many ways from the stress of necessary changes to their lives.

The additional stress from the knowledge that it is possible for new variants to appear and thus continue the struggle – including the weariness of parents, and the many changes and adaptations to children’s family, academic and social lives – nudges us to keep on the theme of assessing and building “resilience” in our children and teens. We’ve taken many months in these columns to review research and established knowledge of childhood development in order to give parents, grandparents, professionals and others who care about young lives some help in knowing what to look for and what to build into the foundations of mental health for our young ones.

For the past few months we’ve been discussing Maslow’s “Six Basic Needs” and determining how well, or how poorly, these needs are being met. They give us clues to how much help each particular child/teen might need to prevent mental stress with this, and other, stressful situations. Last month we talked about the need to “belong” and how this need is even more primitive and foundational than the need to be loved. Maslow argues that if one has not experienced being accepted and affirmed for who they are, and taken in as a valued member of a family or other group, they will not be able to reach the next level of “basic need,” the need to give and accept LOVE.

Love, as the song says, is “more than just a four letter word.” It is a rather high level concept that includes the ability to care for another as much as we care for ourselves. Most of you have probably encountered someone who lacks this ability, and you have noticed how harmful it is - not only to other people but to the unloving person themselves. The whole discussion of adapting to safety measures during the pandemic has, for most Christians, centered on the concept of love for one’s neighbor. Keeping distance from them not because we don’t care for them, but because we do care for them. Wearing a mask even though it is uncomfortable keeps us and others safe. Love is both a choice and an ability.

The Bible tells us to just do it. However, we have learned after years of study why some do and some don’t, and why some can and some can’t. Using the model we’ve been using to understand the features of resiliency in children, we understand that:

- If at the first stage of life a baby learns that their well-being is not interesting to people; if they fear for their survival because of hunger, cold, untended illness, and other neglect; and if they are not responded to when they call for help;
- If at the second stage they are left feeling insecure and anxious because their environment is unpredictable and their care is inconsistent;
- If at the third stage they are not welcomed into a loving group that is happy to see them, include them, and find ways to let them know that they are accepted as they are and “belong”;
- THEN the fourth stage of development – the ability to look outside of their own needs, to truly care about the well-being of others, to extend themselves to look after others’ needs even when it’s inconvenient to do so, to give and not just take - is something they don’t understand, which makes them unwilling, and thus unable, to do it.

I like the Beatles, but I’m afraid John Lennon lied. He said: “All you need is love.” And then he said it again: “Love is all you need.” Yes, we all need love. However, if one has not been given the foundation for love (survival, security, belonging), one is not able to love, and therefore cannot choose to love.

It is our responsibility to love children before we ask them to love us, so they know what love is. We do this by giving them what they need, so they will be able to give others what they need. Love lifts us up and makes us strong. Love makes the world go around. The more loved we are by the more people, and the more love we give to other people, the more we can weather the storms of life. Including this one.
Mother stood by the kitchen sink wearing her usual calico apron as she rinsed vegetables from our summer garden. It was a warm day, so the kitchen door stood open but the screen door kept the pesky flies and mosquitoes out. Mother looked up when she heard “Hi” from a voice calling through the screen. There stood a boy with caramel-colored hair wearing a blue plaid shirt.

Mother dried her hands on her apron to go check on our visitor. Our house was a long way outside of Minneapolis in a small unincorporated area called Crystal Village. We seldom had drop-in visitors other than the occasional Watkins Company salesman who sold us Kool-aid and vanilla. I followed mother to the door and stood behind her because I felt shy when I recognized that the boy visitor was from my fifth-grade class in school.

“My name is Warren,” he said, as he wiped his sweating forehead on his shirt sleeve. “I came to see Vivian.” Then as though he needed to further explain, he added, “We’re in the same class in school. I live in town.”

He pointed to a bike leaning against the house, “I rode my bike here.”

I gaped at him from behind mother, completely embarrassed that a boy came to see me, especially a boy that I kinda liked. Mother added to my discomfort when she said, “Please come in. You’ve come a long way to see Vivian.” I squeaked out a “hi” and nervously backed out of the kitchen. From the living room, I heard Mother graciously invite Warren to sit at our wooden kitchen table covered with a tablecloth of red and white checkered oilcloth. I was curious so I peeked around the door into the kitchen and saw Mother place a plate of chocolate chip cookies and three glasses of milk on the table.

“Vivian,” Mother called, “Come and join us.” I didn’t respond. Mother sat down across from Warren and passed him the plate of cookies. I, on the other hand, suddenly became obsessively domestic. I rushed into the kitchen, grabbed a dust cloth from the kitchen cupboard - all the while avoiding the eyes of our guest - and went into the living room. There, I bounced from one piece of furniture to another, dusting and polishing all the way.

What was I thinking? Did I want Warren to see that I was far too busy for idle chitchat or to go outside and play? I think I was so embarrassed to have a boy pay attention to me that I went temporarily crazy! With mother’s urging I finally sat and ate a cookie, but I didn’t say more than “hi” and “bye” to my kind but neglected-by-me guest. When he left, at least he had enjoyed a delectable snack and my mother’s sweet presence.

At school in the fall, Warren and I were in the same sixth-grade class. It didn’t escape my notice that he was taller than on his summer visit. For the first time, I also saw that he had a nice smile. Warren played with the boys at recess and I with the girls, but we did exchange glances. My strange summer behavior didn’t seem to deter his interest.

In February when Valentine’s Day came around, everyone in my class excitedly gave and received valentine cards. I sat at my desk opening and reading all the delicious messages. Warren suddenly appeared from behind me. I looked up and he handed me a small box. “Open it,” he gently urged. I looked around and saw the eyes of all the class on me. As I slowly opened the box, I found a lovely red brooch in the shape of a heart with my name in gold. I blushed and whispered, “Thank you.” I was secretly very pleased. Warren’s smile assured me that he was too.

To my chagrin but to Warren’s apparent pleasure, from then on, our classmates giggled and chanted “Warren likes Vivian.” He and I continued to exchange glances and smiles. That summer, I was surprised that Warren didn’t bike out to visit me. I was disappointed, but then I learned that he moved out of state with his family. I never heard from him again.

Though that was seventy-five years ago, the gift from my generous young suitor still resides in my jewelry drawer. As I look at the brooch today, it makes me smile as I remember the confused yet delightful emotions of first love. Happy Valentine’s Day!
The newly revitalized Membership Ministry under the leadership of Chair Renae Boyum is gearing up for great things! One of the key things we’re hoping you keep in mind is that ALL of us are members of this ministry, and ALL of us need to keep our eyes out for new folks and make sure they are greeted and welcomed into our wonderful congregation. If you’re a bit on the shy side like me, you may ask yourself “But what do I say? How do I break the ice and engage them in conversation?” I did an internet search for ice-breaker questions and found hundreds of them! Here is Part 1 of my favorite questions (including a few that I created especially for greeting IUCC visitors). Look for Part 2 next month!

1. Hi, I’m ______. Welcome to IUCC! What’s your name? Is this your first time visiting us?
2. How did you hear about our church?
3. Do you live in the area?
4. Where did you grow up? If I visited your hometown, what places of interest would you suggest I visit?
5. What are some of your favorite places to go and things to do in Orange County?
6. Are you a traveler or a homebody?
7. Have you travelled outside the U.S.? What’s your favorite place of all the places you’ve visited?
8. What do/did you do for a living? As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?
10. What do you like to do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies or collections?
11. What is your favorite kind of music? Favorite instrument? Favorite song? If you had to sing karaoke, what song would you pick?
12. Do you play a musical instrument? What is your favorite musical instrument and why?
13. How would your friends describe you?
14. Who had the most influence on you growing up?
15. Do you have any hidden talents or superpowers? What are they?
16. What’s your favorite TV show? Favorite movie? Favorite book? What recent book or movie have you read/seen that you would recommend?
17. If you could learn one new skill, what would it be?
18. What’s your favorite sport or exercise?
19. You are hosting your own late night talk show - who do you invite as your first guest?
20. If you were famous, what would it be for?
21. What is your favorite food? What’s your favorite meal to cook?
22. What was your least favorite food as a child? Do you still hate it or do you love it now?
23. 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s: Which decade did you love the most and why?
24. What is your favorite item you’ve bought or been given in the past 5 years?
25. What would the title of your autobiography be?

I’ll bet you’ll be off and running in a fascinating conversation before you get to question 10! Have fun and keep practicing - before long, you’ll have charmed the socks off the visitor (and maybe even made a new friend!).
In his seminal published work entitled *A Theology of Liberation*, liberation theologian Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that to be a church in Latin America means to be able to take a clear position against states of social injustice while attempting to abolish that injustice and build a more equitable human order. He also points out that the protection the church receives is closely linked with the dominant social class which often benefits from a Latin American capitalist social perspective. Gutiérrez believes, in general, that the oppressive Christian message of the church is, sadly, very much a part of the dominant sociopolitical ideology.

I would argue that what Gutiérrez describes in terms of the church is not limited to the Latin American experience but that the true meaning of being a Christian and the purpose of the Christian church should be to stand in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. This solidarity can be defined as the fight against any and all evil systems (cf. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) that dehumanize those who are less fortunate. I believe that what Gutiérrez describes in terms of the Latin American experience is actually quite evident in our current modern American society.

In my view, those who are marginalized can be classified into various categories. However, within this construct those who are marginalized would include all people of color, the LGTBQ+ community, refugees, poor immigrants, and the homeless seeking hope for a New Jerusalem (cf. Revelation 21:2). I believe that the protection that the church receives from the upper echelons of social classes is also not limited to the Latin American society, but is actually something that is being experienced by many people in the United States. In my view, this protection has infiltrated the consciousness of American culture. In fact, there is ample evidence that fundamentalist literal Christian orthodoxy has hijacked Christianity and aligned the message of scripture to be in sync with a political ideology that does not see Christianity in terms of caring for one another, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, and loving our neighbor.

I keep being challenged with the Bible that I read and interpret in contrast to how fundamentalists and literalist readers of the Bible use scriptures to espouse ideas that are truly antithetical to the message of the historical Jesus.

The late Bishop John Shelby Spong has written extensively about the particulars related to how the Bible has been hijacked by the Franklin Grahams of the world and other self declared Christians who have aligned themselves with the Imperial power of elected leaders in the United States. The work of Gutiérrez should cause open and affirming (ONA) progressive Christians to contemplate the following four sayings that, I believe, define what it means to be a Christian church from the perspective of liberation theology:

- Jesus said to CARE for the sick, not get each other sick.
- Jesus said to WELCOME the stranger, not to send them back.
- Jesus said to FEED the hungry, not to blame them for their hunger.
- Jesus said to LOVE your neighbor, not to love your nation.
I entered seminary in 1964 with an informal major in existential philosophy and theology. Existentialism became a way of life for me. It provided a perceptual framework with which to better understand life and also gave me strength and resiliency in dealing with life's challenges.

Although I embrace existentialism, I believe that many of the ideas are too extreme. For example, Albert Camus's idea of the absurd goes too far, saying that all life is absurd. The absurdity arises from humankind's wanting answers. They want meaning and purpose in life to be revealed to them by the universe, but the universe is silent. Each human being must figure out for themselves what their meaning in life is and what their purpose in life is. Camus said that we must give the void its colors. Soren Kierkegaard believed that life has its absurdities but that life itself is not absurd. This is a corrective to Camus' extreme position.

Although I will not discuss freedom in this article, to decide and to create our own meaning and purpose in life, I do want to mention Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of personal freedom. In giving absolute human freedom, he says that there are no constrictions, not even morality. This is another example of existentialism sometimes becoming too extreme.

Absurdity and the paradoxes in Christian theology

“Absurd” is defined as wildly unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate. Similar terms are: preposterous, ridiculous, ludicrous, laughable, idiotic, stupid, foolish, irrational, illogical, incongruous, and unbelievable. The take-away is that absurd relates to illogical, incongruous, irrational, and unbelievable.

Paradox is a part of absurdity. It similarly relates to the same qualities, involving things that don’t match up, that don’t make sense. These are conceptual problems that cannot be resolved on a rational basis. Not only is life filled with paradoxes, but Christian theology contains many of them. The virgin birth, Mary being pregnant with Jesus, Jesus’ miracles depicted in the New Testament, and Jesus’ resurrection, are some of the Christian paradoxes. They could also be called conundrums, “confusing and difficult problems or questions.”

Progressive Christianity does not get caught up in Jesus’ resurrection becoming a conundrum or a paradox. Most progressive Christians see Jesus’ resurrection as a metaphor. Therefore, we can embrace this idea and call ourselves a church of Jesus’ resurrection, a Church of hope, a Church of new life, and a Church that can overcome.

Original sin as a paradox and a metaphor

Progressive Christians may totally dismiss the idea of original sin, refusing to believe that humankind is inherently evil (sinful) because Eve ate the apple in the garden of Eden. I believe this would be similar to throwing out Jesus’ resurrection because it makes no logical sense. Also, progressive Christians may be uncomfortable saying that humankind is evil.

If seen as metaphor, as symbolic, the concept of original sin helps us deal with the element of depravity that does, unfortunately, exist in humankind. In doing research on race this last year, I came across accounts of horrendous brutality towards Black persons, especially freed slaves, after the Reconstruction. Black men were hanged and also burned to death. This was often the occasion for a celebration, with merriment, dancing and singing. There were even food vendors. Postcards with pictures of Black men being hanged or burned to death could be purchased for $0.05 apiece. Other atrocities will remain unnamed for the sake of delicacy. The inhumanity of Black treatment after the Reconstruction reminds us of the treatment of the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War.

The concept of original sin reminds us that there is evil and depravity in the world, and that we must identify it and do something to mitigate this evil.

Theodicy, the paradox and conundrum for which there is no rational solution

The one unsolvable paradox and conundrum in Christianity is the presence of evil in the world. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why does he/she allow this reality to exist? Since we cannot rationally resolve the problem of evil in the world, we can rely on Kierkegaard’s leap of faith to help us deal with this problem. Although Kierkegaard has not used the term, it is his ultimate position that our Christian faith does not depend on logical thinking nor on rational decisions, but rather on a leap of faith that
transcends all questions and doubts. This leap of faith allows us to embrace Christianity and to benefit from the richness of our faith.

**Existentialism helps us on our faith journey**
Because we are open and affirming and a church of diversity, we validate and support each person’s individual journey. Nothing is thrust upon individuals to believe, and there is no pressure to conform to a fixed and rigid theology with no room for questioning. We do not conform to any set of ideas. Because of this openness and support, our church is unique and special. We offer a rare kind of environment for people to grow. They are encouraged to question, to go “outside the box,” to be creative in developing their own personal theology, and to give the void its colors. This kind of radical decision-making and being totally responsible for one’s own theology is at the very heart of what existentialism embraces, in all of its varied ramifications.

---

**Existentialism and a Do-It-Yourself Faith**

**How Existentialism Supports Progressive Christianity**

A four-week IUCC Adult Education Class coming in May 2022

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