Invitation to the IUCC Spring Congregational Meeting

Dear Friends,

Please join us on Sunday, May 15, for our ANNUAL SPRING CONGREGATIONAL MEETING. Highlights of this meeting will include: Ratification of the 2022-2023 Leadership Slate; Written Reports from Ministry & Committee Chairs; and Treasurer’s Report.

By a majority vote of both the Administration and the Ministries Boards, this meeting will be held virtually via Zoom. Information on Zoom participation will be provided in an e-blast a few days before the scheduled meeting.

What: Annual Spring Congregational Meeting  
When: Sunday, May 15, 2021, at 12:30 p.m. (sign-ins open at noon)  
Where: Via Zoom

Please note that only corporate members may vote at congregational meetings, and we need a quorum of such members to conduct the business of the church. It is very important that you attend!

Our bylaws require that when a congregational meeting is held electronically, we must also schedule an informational forum prior the meeting. Because we didn’t want to conflict with Mother’s Day, we held the forum on Sunday, May 1. It was publicized in several e-blasts the week before. The forum drew 14 people, and we had a lively discussion on a number of topics.

These regular congregational meetings are important to the life of our beloved church. Your participation matters, and we look forward to seeing your smiling faces!

In hope and optimism,  
Tricia Aynes  
Moderator
Easter Sunday April 17

It was a bright and glorious Easter morning with a great sermon, spectacular music (with brass accompaniment!), flower-filled cross, delicious crepes, egg hunt, and the debut of our new shade “sails”

- photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes
Robinmarie and Ian prepared a balloon arch for a photo spot (upper right photo). The Easter lesson included smelling different spices and oils so the kids could immerse themselves in the story (with Ms. Myrna & our Sunday School youth volunteers). Sunday school included decorating Easter bags for the egg hunt. The egg hunt was a blast! Most of our photos were a blur - they were all so fast! Thank you to all the volunteers who donated their time, eggs, & treats to make it possible! A special youth scavenger hunt challenge had 3 determined MYPers racing across IUCC. Thank you Scavenger Hunt creator Robinmarie and Youth Group leader Myrna!

- Article & photos courtesy of Lauren Louie
Happy Easter! I know it’s been a few weeks, but it’s still the season of Easter, and I’m still feeling the joy of our Easter celebration. After the two years of a pandemic, it was such a joy to finally celebrate Easter in our church with the sound of the angels singing and the brass belting! We had children laughing, and under the masks, everyone was smiling. We celebrated Easter with a couple of surprises which made the day all the more exciting and definitely sweet! (How about those crepes?) I hope we can continue to build on the energy of Easter as we meet May with joy!

We began the month with May Day and a focus on workers as we observed International Labor Day. Fittingly, the first week of May is also Teacher Appreciation Week, and we have so many reasons to feel appreciation for our teachers at our IUCC Early Childhood Center. With Irma Rosales at the helm, our teachers have maintained a safe school site that continues to be the most COVID safe preschool in the county, ensuring our kids and their parents feel comfortable. Our preschool is bouncing back as the number of attendees continues to grow. It is outperforming the budget, bringing us some financial relief alongside the pride we feel in the service we provide to our community. Did you know that quite a few of our teachers have been here over 15 years? Their commitment, positive attitude, and professionalism is to be praised! I know you join me and our childcare committee in gratitude and appreciation for our incredible staff!

Reflecting on incredible staff and contributions that deserve our gratitude and appreciation, this month we celebrate the retirement of the Rev. Steve Swope. He has served IUCC at two different times, and in multiple roles. First as our Interim Pastor, later as our Adult Education Director, with that role eventually growing to include his position as our Administrative Pastor. Steve has been here for our church during times of transition, and now we are going to see him through one more as he transitions into retirement. So please join us on May 15 as he takes the pulpit and again on May 22nd for his retirement celebration. We’ll celebrate at both services and with a reception after the second service.

I hope that the theme of our church will be celebration as we move forward. Rebuilding from the pandemic, I hope we will experience joy in being together, that we’ll intentionally create connections and go out of our way to have fun with one another. I’m looking forward to celebrating Pastor Steve, gathering with our young people, welcoming new members into our midst and inducting a new slate of leadership. Let’s get together for “Sipping Under the Sails” (see page 8 for details) and enjoying good conversation with no other agenda than wanting to spend time together.

With all that has been hard in this world these past two years, let’s live as Easter people who really do celebrate beyond a day, believing in resurrection as we participate in the resurrection of our church. So let’s celebrate those that serve among us! Let’s celebrate our commitment to serving beyond ourselves! Let’s celebrate the joy that comes despite a world so often in despair. Yes, let’s live as Easter people and let that energy carry us forward.

Happy Easter yet again!

Rejoicing in love,

Pastor Sarah
I need to start with thanks this month, because it’s my last opportunity to do so. I extend my sincere thanks to the following people who have made my work easier by your support and participation:

- the Adult Programs Ministry members, including Eduardo Arismendi-Pardi, Bil Aulenbach, Jim & Tricia Aynes, Al Gumb, Terry LePage, the late Jim Martin, Craig Repp, Jerry von Talge, Susan Sayre, and Ken Wyant!
- Comma Group leaders, including Eduardo, Bil, Tricia, Terry, and Kathi Smith!
- all who have attended adult education events or guest speakers or been in a Comma Group!

Thanks also to Jack Sokol for bringing Mindfulness Meditation to us last month, to Bil Aulenbach for leading us into Bart Ehrman’s work, and to Al Gumb for inviting us into the thought of Marcus Borg! Al will continue his Borg sessions through the end of May, Sunday mornings at 10, and then in June, Jerry von Talge will lead an exploration of Existentialism’s connections to progressive Christianity. And of course, Ken Wyant will keep Tuesday Bible Study open, at IUCC and on Zoom – currently reading through the book of Job!

Thanks to everyone who made the April 10 Workday such a success! Our facilities looked wonderful on Easter Sunday, and they continue to do so. Wayne Banwell, Daniel Blackburn, Renae Boyum, and Pat Sauter led the charge and lead in my gratitude!

Our facilities have gotten busier the last couple months, and they will become even more so in June. The Administration Board approved a lease with another church, who will be using Plumer Hall every Sunday from 12:30-4:30 p.m. starting June 5.

Their first half-hour is set-up, so there will be some overlap as Coffee Hour cleans up. But we will need to be good and gracious hosts, making space and time available—and keeping things put away so that others can worship and fellowship comfortably.

As I enter my final weeks as Administrative Pastor, I feel so blessed to be able to end my ministry here, doing this work. It has been even more rewarding and fulfilling than I imagined when Pastor Paul first suggested it. I’m grateful to him, Pastor Dave, and Pastor Sarah for such generous collegiality, and to all of you!

Since the beginning of the pandemic the Administration Board has been managing the necessary restrictions on activities taking place on the IUCC campus in accordance with guidelines and recommendations from local, state and federal health agencies. Lately, as local restrictions have gradually been dropped, we have been doing a monthly evaluation of our policies. At the April meeting of the Admin Board we decided to maintain the following restrictions:

- Masks are required at all times when inside the sanctuary except for designated participants in worship
- Small groups may make their own choices in regards to masking
- Eating and drinking indoors (with the exception of communion) is prohibited
- All other restrictions are lifted

We will continue to discuss what precautions are warranted at each meeting and would like to offer the following guidance on what changes are likely to be made in the near future.

The primary metric of local COVID severity we are tracking is hospitalizations. Specifically the board is looking for a sustained period of low hospitalization before we relax our mask mandate.

The lack of vaccine availability for children under 5 is also a serious concern. While not a strict requirement, the board would like to see vaccines be made available to young children before dropping our mask mandate.

No decisions have been made, but the expectation of the board is that assuming we do not have another surge in hospitalizations and that vaccines become available for young children in the next few months, we will substantially relax or end our mask mandate over the summer.

We are aware that there are a variety of opinions on masking among the congregation. Many of us are ready to take our masks off while others of us feel safe to attend worship only because of masking. Changes to our masking policy, when they happen, will be thoroughly considered and announced well ahead of time. We are looking into several different scenarios for how that may happen, including possibly designating one service as mask-optional while keeping the other masked.

- Daniel Blackburn, Administrative Board Chair
We are so sad to lose Administrative Pastor Steve Swope, who will be retiring near the end of this month, but we wish him Godspeed on his future adventures! Steve’s last sermon will be on May 15, and May 22 will be his last Sunday with us for a while. To allow the next Administrator time to get acquainted with the position, Steve and Mary will be “away” from IUCC for six months. “Once that time has elapsed,” he says, “we look forward to returning to IUCC and participating in the congregation once more.”

A little background about Steve and IUCC: He served as our Interim Pastor from 2004-2006 (20 months), then returned as Adult Programs Director in April 2016. He became our Administrative Pastor in June 2018 and has served in that capacity for the past six years.

During that time, we’ve come to rely heavily on Steve’s capacity to wear many hats and to wear them all well. This extremely intelligent man came with a myriad of skills, including pastoral, tech, organizational, handyman, problem-solving, and much more. He has been faithful and dependable, and his moral compass is always set at true North. He served as the facilitator of our Strategic Task Force in 2022 and did an amazing job. IUCC is a better place because of his strong character and many contributions.

- Tricia Aynes, Moderator

For those who would like to contribute to an appreciation gift as Steve retires, you are encouraged to send or drop off a check at the office with “Steve’s retirement” written in the notes section. We’ll combine them for a nice departing financial gift from all of us at IUCC. Thank you!
Easter was glorious! Our amazing choir was in spectacular voice – and the brass accompaniment added to the sense of jubilance and celebration! What a wonderful new custom to bring fragrant flowers from home to decorate the empty cross, making it a splendid symbol of renewal and rebirth. Pastor Sarah’s stirring sermon and the incredible solo by Jocelyne made the service inspiring and meaningful. The delicious crepes on the patio were very popular, as was the children’s egg hunt. We smiled beneath our masks and enjoyed a warm sense of community as we visited with old friends and visitors under our gorgeous new “sails” (shade cloth). I am so thankful to our wonderful staff and volunteers for the time and care they took to make the day so special.

Amidst the celebration, though, we know there are challenges still to be met. Some of our beloved congregants have been slow to return to in-person worship, and there are more empty pews than we’d like to see. We are in a time of transition, and we miss our absent friends and the sense of community that we took for granted before the pandemic upended our lives.

We are not alone, my friends. Churches across the U.S. are facing the same challenges. It’s an overarching problem. Consider these statistics from https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america:，“According to data collected in April/May 2020 by Barna Group, one-in-three practicing Christians dropped out of church completely during COVID-19. Last June, the AP broke a story about many houses of worship in the U.S. that were shuttered forever due to the pandemic. What’s worse, church membership in the U.S. dropped below 50% for the first time in 2020, according to Gallup data dating back to 1940. A new analysis using the American Family Survey suggests that religious attendance has declined significantly in the past two years. The share of regular churchgoers is down by 6 percentage points, from 34% in 2019 to 28% in 2021. Meanwhile, the share of secular Americans who have never or seldom attended religious services increased by 7 percentage points.”

During the worst of the pandemic, churches had to shut their doors. We were forced to change our habits – including the habit of coming to church. We had to get accustomed to staying home in solitude. Some of us felt lonely and disconnected, while others grew used to being alone and took up new solitary hobbies and pursuits. While some of us have joyfully returned to socializing, others are finding it difficult to relearn social graces and would prefer to stay home. Some have health conditions that make it unwise to mix with a crowd of people.

Like it or not, these are the times we’re living in. We need to acknowledge and accept how much things have changed while showing each other as much love, care, and compassion as we can under challenging circumstances. We’re all in agreement about what the problem is: not enough people are coming back. So what’s the solution? At its core, I think the solution is pretty straightforward: add more people. That means reaching inwards (calling our absent friends, letting them know we miss them, and inviting them back) and reaching outwards (making our church more well-known in the wider community and welcoming visitors when they come).

There are lots of creative ways to attract people to church, and IUCC has been actively engaged in a variety of them: Inviting folks to our Trunk or Treat event in October; Distributing door hangers throughout the city of Irvine to advertise our Snow Day, Advent Workshop, and Choir Concert in December; Enhancing the quality of our online worship services; Making sure that an internet search for “progressive church in Irvine” makes IUCC pop up; Providing a children’s egg hunt and delicious crepes on Easter; and – our secret weapon – Alex Ingals and his amazingly delicious homemade pastries every Sunday!

The Admin Board is working on a congregational survey that will be coming later this month. We want to get a better feel for what’s going on with you. If you haven’t been back, what do we need to do to make you more comfortable? Watch for the survey, and take part. We want to know what you’re thinking and feeling. It will help us determine how to proceed moving forward.

We’re all discouraged by the slow progress back to normal, dear ones. But I want with all my heart to remind you that we have a terrific church filled with amazing people, and we will get through this transitional time together. We’re in much better shape than many churches, and it’s all because we’ve hung in there and stayed the course. We’ve surmounted a lot of obstacles to stay in contact with one another under extremely challenging circumstances, and we’ve succeeded in some pretty innovative ways.

The solution to empty pews is to fill them. Let’s all do our part to (1) Reach out to friends we haven’t seen in a while and invite them back; and (2) Welcome visitors with open arms and hearts. We can do this if we all work together to make it happen!
Meet Our New Church Administrator

Meet Sandra De Anda, our new Church Administrator! Sandra earned a B.A. in English Literature and Film Studies from Reed College. Following her graduation, she returned home to Orange County and became involved in deportation defense work with the OC Rapid Response Network, where she learned to conduct intakes and support cases.

Her work experience is impressive: Program Coordinator for the Orange County Justice Fund and Legal Assistant for California Law Associates. In her two years with the OC Justice Fund, she coordinating payment of immigration bonds: a multi-step process with lots of moving parts involved. She operated the organizational hotline to connect detainees with legal resources.

She is bilingual (fluent in both Spanish and English) and proficient in a number of computer programs of importance to us. She has a wide range of administrative skills that match up beautifully with what we need. Pastor Sarah checked with her references, all of whom give her high marks.

Sandra enjoys meeting new people and has done stand-up comedy for nonprofit organization fundraisers. She has excellent media skills and is comfortable with social media. Here’s how she described herself during her interview with us:

“I’m an extrovert. I believe in genuine relationships. I have a humble background, and I don’t think I’m better than other people. I’m open to new experiences. I’m a ‘glass half full’ kind of person – very positive. I’m a published writer (OC Weekly), and I believe in transformative justice. I like working with systems that impact peoples’ lives. I can be goofy, but I get things done.”

She says “I am excited by the opportunity to work with IUCChile also growing and extending the reach of your congregation.”

We’re thrilled to welcome Sandra as our newest staff member, and we think she’ll be an excellent fit!

- Tricia Aynes, Moderator

IUCC Green Faith Event on May 14!

IUCC Green Faith Event May 14th
Please join the Green Faith Team at the Irvine Climate Coalition’s event at Heritage Park Saturday afternoon, May 14th 4 p.m. - 7 p.m. IUCCh will have a display table and several IUCC members have volunteered to speak. Several high school and college environmental clubs along with other community groups and vendors will be joining us. We hope to attract new individuals and families from the community to learn more about IUCC.

- Chuck Heath

SAVE THE DATE!
With the days getting longer and summer approaching, it’s time to gather under the new “SAILS” at IUCC. Join us for the first of these gatherings on Thursday, May 26, for “SIPPING UNDER THE SAILS” -- bring your own refreshing beverage and perhaps an appetizer or dessert to share! DETAILS TO FOLLOW.

Other tentative dates to save are June 22 -- “SUMMER SOLSTICE UNDER THE SAILS,” July 11, and August 16.

- Renae Boyum, Membership Chair

“Sipping Under the Sails” on May 19!

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- Tricia Aynes, Moderator
Thank you all for your amazing support of Family Promise over the last few years. For those of you who do not know, Family Promise of Orange County is an amazing interfaith organization helping families experiencing homelessness achieve housing stability. They partner with local congregations to house and support families while they provide intensive case management to get them back on their feet. While most congregations were closed for 18 months, their work adjusted to meet the needs. In 2020, they served 65 families (99 parents and 170 children) and in 2021, 98 families (a total of 318 people including 169 children). They worked with donors to stabilize families, providing counseling, groceries, gas gift cards, and often shelter in hotels or Airbnb. They also focused on maintaining their “graduates” who had moved to independent housing. Many of those folks were underemployed or unemployed due to Covid. They received food and multiple other services to help them stay housed.

Family Promise is now finally ready to reopen their Emergency Shelter Program on May 15th. Churches have stepped forward to host families for at least one week during the next few months. IUCC’s Mission & Service, with the support of the Ministries and Administrative Boards, decided to open Plumer Hall to Family Promise families for a week in June. Please mark June 12 – 19, our hosting dates, on your calendar in case you might like to volunteer!

Think about how you can support this effort. You could sign up:

- To provide a main dish, veggie or salad on a night of your choice. (Dropping off the food item is fine.)
- To be an overnight host. We need two people each night (sleeping on a blowup mattress in either the library or the youth room OR in your own RV in the parking lot). The overnight folks will arrive at 7:00 p.m. and leave the following morning at 7:00 a.m.
- To be a dinner host. Arrive at 5:30 p.m., make sure the tables are ready for our guests, set out the food items, put all leftovers away, and stay until the overnight person arrives at 7:00 p.m.

Please sign up on the IUCC website: https://iucc.org/family-promise

On the form you’ll notice that Monday and Thursday meals are being prepared by Tapestry Unitarian Church. We appreciate their support!!

To be an overnight host or dinner host, contact Sharon Lynn at Sharon.lynn15@outlook.com or 571-236-9517.

Early in June, we’ll know exactly how many adults and children will be staying with us. We expect 2 or 3 families. Family Promise provides an online training for all new volunteers. Details to come later.

Look for the Mission & Service information table after church. If you can’t help directly, donations to support Family Promise can be made through your church offering (memo: Family Promise). If you donate to IUCC online, you can indicate Family Promise.

We hope you will join with us to make our guests feel welcome and safe at IUCC. The Mission and Service Ministry is immensely thankful for your support of this important work to help homeless children and parents.
Photos from Palm Sunday on April 10
Courtesy of Tricia Aynes, Lauren Louie & Janet Emery

The children led their own processional as the choir sang “Hosanna!” Thank you, Robinmarie, for guiding our procession, leading practice, and bringing so many palms! Thanks to the Chancel Choir for providing such beautiful music and to all our volunteers who worked so hard to make the experience so memorable and special!!
On April 3 at Sunday School, Robinmarie used perfumes and the power of smell to help the kids learn about the story of Mary Anointing Jesus with sweet perfume for Sunday School. She started with some circle time to get the wiggles out. Then they each got to pick a scent to take home & packed them in little baggies for a safe trip home to enjoy.
Prayer Stations

Robinmarie has been making these lovely prayer stations for IUCC! Here are two pictures of Pastor Sarah, Mollie, and Robinmarie doing it together. You held the ice in your palm. The cold helps focus reflections and thinking. Mollie also holds a flower with some lavender that was part of the Sunday School lesson on perfumes in the story of Mary Anoints Jesus that Robinmarie taught that day.

- Lauren Louie

Meet Hudson and Elliott!

I am Hudson and I am 6 years old.
I am Elliot and I am 4 years old. We are brothers.

Why do you like coming to church?
Hudson - Because there are usually snacks and I get to play with my friends
Elliott - Not sure

What would tell someone if they asked why is what fun to come to Sunday School?
Hudson - Snacks, fun with friends, and you get to do projects
Elliott - It is just fun

What is your favorite Dessert?
Both said Crepes (Note: it was Easter and they were enjoying their crepes during this interview)

What is your favorite color?
Hudson – Blue
Elliott – Green, White, and Red

Where is your favorite place to go on Vacation?
Hudson – Disneyland!
Elliott - Camping

What do you like about school?
Hudson – We have a garden and music and a PE teacher who teaches us soccer
Elliott – Having lunch

In Memorium

We are sad to announce that long-time UCC member Jan Osborne died on Monday, April 18, 2022 after a long journey battling cancer. She and her husband Brian had moved north to be with her daughter Susan, but were planning to return to Irvine and IUCC. When Jan learned of her prognosis, she boldly and bravely met it, surrounding herself with those she loved, proclaiming that love, and ensuring that they knew she was all right. She died with dignity and grace. The date of her service has yet to be determined. Please surround Brian with love. He will be moving to Irvine shortly.

by Myrna Bohan, Co-Chair of MYP
We were so pleased to welcome Ayn Craciun to speak at both services on Earth Sunday, April 24. She provided valuable information that will assist us in our efforts to practice Green Faith. Towards that end, she provided interested parties with info on an upcoming OC Climate Coalition meeting. She also encouraged us to sign a petition that will be presented to the Irvine City Council. We look forward to hearing more from her about what we can do to address climate change.

Ayn Craciun spoke on Earth Sunday

We will have our next Diversity & Inclusion cultural dinner at Natraj’s Tandoori in the Quail Hill Shopping Center. We will dine at 5:30 on Saturday, May 7. We will have as our special guest and interpreter, Vasantha, who is known to all who participate in the Tuesday Bible study, and, I’m sure, in some other contexts. She will share her insights on Indian and Sri Lankan culture and food. (Yes, that’s a very broad spectrum!)

Natraj’s has about as many vegetarian items as meat. Some items are spicy, but most are mild enough to be enjoyed by a wide range of palates. We are regulars at Natraj’s with our daughter and her caregivers.

Please let us know if you plan to attend. For those who may need transportation or simply desire to carpool, let us know that as well, and we’ll see how we can match people up. Mark your calendar and share with others!

Looking forward to another chance to visit with you and to get to know each other better (while enjoying delicious food!).

Mary & Craig

craigrepp@gmail.com

Please Welcome Irvine Hebron Church!

As part of our strategic planning process to look for alternative sources of income and open our facilities to the wider community, we are pleased to welcome Irvine Hebron Church! Both the Admin Board and the Ministries Board have approved the lease, and Irvine Hebron will begin renting Plumer Hall on Sunday afternoons beginning in early June.

D & I Dinners Continue!

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It’s easy to take it for granted. Our eyesight, that is. We read the newspaper and books. We look at computers, cellphones, television, and movies. We can see the aphids whose life’s work is to devour our patio plants. When friends or relatives appear, we recognize their familiar faces. Some people have such sharp eyesight that they spot the dust under the bed. There is a remedy for that: don’t look! When we are upset with ourselves or with a friend - or with the whole wide world! - observing a thing of beauty can calm and refresh us. Looking into the liquid eyes of a canine family member or playing peek-a-boo with a giggling toddler can bring rejuvenation to a sad spirit.

Sight is a gift, a precious gift. Yet, it is easy to take good sight for granted. When friends or relatives – or we, ourselves – begin to have diminished vision, we become more aware of the value of our eyes. How sad when reading becomes a struggle or when a movie is one long blur. It’s embarrassing when we stop to greet people and we can’t recognize them. We walk away, shake our heads, and wonder, “Who are they?” Their faces don’t come through because of the dimness of our vision.

Yet, it’s quite fabulous that our eyes serve us so well. Recently, I learned a few things about eyes. Did you know:

- Your eyes are almost the same size as on the day you were born; they grow much slower than the rest of your body.
- The average eye is one inch in diameter and a mass of 7.5 grams, weighing 0.25 oz.
- The eye has the second highest metabolic rate of the body, second only to the brain.
- The cornea is the only tissue in the body that doesn’t contain blood vessels.
- Our eyes are made up of over 200 million cells. The muscles moving the eyes are more active than any other muscle in your body.
- People say, “in the blink of an eye” because it’s the fastest muscle in the body. In fact, the lens in your eye is faster than any camera.
It’s May (it’s May)...the lusty month of May 🎵. That means it’s time for the Cannes Film Festival. You thought I was going to slap you with the Oscars, didn’t ya? Well, to tell the truth (great game show from the 50s), Oscar campaigns usually start with the big spring and summer film festivals, and Cannes is the granddaddy of them all. The good folks at Cannes just recently announced this year’s titles in six categories, including the Palme D’Or and the Un Certain Regard competitions. Short movie categories are coming later. Not having seen these films, I’ll announce a few of the nominees, then recommend a film or two by each film’s director as an example of their work. My recommendations are buried within the blurb (look for the italics), so READ CAREFULLY. Enjoy.

1) Elvis (Baz Luhrmann). One of the festival’s more commercial properties is Baz Luhrmann’s Elvis or Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson get the Covid (Clap! Clap! Clap!). We’ll quite likely see this movie with the blockbusters this summer. Since Elvis is a musical, I recommend Moulin Rouge, of course, but you’re well advised to check out Strictly Ballroom as well.

2) Top Gun: Maverick (Joseph Kozinski). A sequel to a film originally released in 1986. Likely to leak out with the blockbusters this summer. I don’t understand the reason for this film, so just see Tony Scott’s original Top Gun instead.

3) Three Thousand Years of Longing (George Miller). The Aussies are back. Last year, Jane Campion; this year, George Miller. Interesting title, this one. Anyway, I should give ya the Mad Max stuff, but my favorite George Miller is still Babe.

4) Jerry Lee Lewis: Trouble in Mind (Ethan Coen) A documentary about...well, you know. For recommendations, there’s brother Joel’s The Tragedy of Macbeth, but Miller’s Crossing & Oh Brother, Where Art Thou will do in a pinch. There’s also a musical from 1985 by Alan Rudolph called Trouble in Mind. Has nothing to do with Jerry Lee, but it looks interesting.

5) Hunt (Lee Jung-Jae). A film by the star of The Squid Games. I recommend The Squid Games, of course. What’s taking so long?!

6) Crimes of the Future (David Cronenberg). A new one from the master of the ghoulish. For recommendations, there’s Videodrome and a car wreck of a love story called Crash. I prefer Naked Lunch, based on William S. Burrough’s novel.

7) Irma Vep (Olivier Assayas) Mr. Assayas’ mini-series based on his well-regarded film from 1996. The recommendation, of course, is the original film.

8) Broker (Hirokazu Kore-eda) The latest from the director of The Shoplifters. The Shoplifters is a good example of Kore-eda’s work, but so is Still Walking.

9) Tori and Lokita (Luc and Pierre Dardenne) The latest from my favorite Belgian super-group. Check out Two Days, One Night, L’Enfant or The Kid with a Bike.

10) Tchaikovsky’s Wife (Kirill Serebrennikov) Kiril, my favorite Russian thumb in Vlad the Impaler’s eye, is back at Cannes. He missed the film festival last year due to being under house arrest; trumped (pardon the pun) up charges, I assure you. This year, he’s in Germany. Rumor hazzit, he’s defecting. Shine on, you crazy Russian diamond! Check out Leto. $1.99 on YouTube right now.
There is no Gospel Without Mary Magdalene:  
A Feminist Perspective of the Easter Story

by Dr. Eduardo Jesús Arismendi-Pardi, Adult Education Ministry and Diversity & Inclusion Ministry

Few women from the Bible receive as much intrigue from Christians and non-Christians alike as Mary Magdalene (also known as Mary of Magdala). In my view, it is literally impossible for the Gospel (i.e., the Good News) to be shared and for the Christian tradition to have grown without the significant role Mary Magdalene played in the ministry of Jesus, which led to the development of the Christian Church. Soon after the death of Jesus, Mary Magdalene seems to fade into history. The fact that Mary Magdalene was commissioned to tell the Apostles about the risen Jesus provides a compelling argument for women in church leadership roles as well as ordained clergy.

What we know about this woman is that she faithfully followed Jesus during his ministry. In fact, she - as well as a number of other women - not only followed Jesus, but also provided needed financial support for his work (cf. Luke 8:1-3). Yet, in today’s society women are continuing to be seen as either unqualified or unworthy of ascending to leadership positions within the Christian Church, with few exceptions such as in the United Church of Christ or other progressive Christian traditions that actually do support women in leadership in general, and in church leadership in particular. One has to pause and ask, “Isn’t it interesting that women supported the ministry of Jesus ‘... who provided for them out of their resources’ (Luke 8:3, NRSV) and yet the credit went to the men that followed Jesus? Isn’t it interesting that so many Christian churches refused to ordain women and assigned them to lesser roles?” I can think of a number of churches that adhere to seeing women as less able and less qualified to be leaders. I often wonder if these churches truly follow the Way of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene was a witness to the death of Jesus, and she was also the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. According to the Gospel of John (20:11-18), Mary did not recognize Jesus when she went into the tomb. She, in fact, had mistaken the resurrected Jesus for a gardener whom she asked where Jesus’s body had been taken. As a devout follower of the Way of Jesus, I can only imagine how distraught she must have felt in dealing with the death of Jesus. When Jesus called her by her name, she knew it was Him and she was commissioned to tell the disciples about the resurrected Jesus. Without this interaction at the tomb, in my opinion, there would be no Gospel to be shared. She was, in my view, an apostle to Jesus but sadly she is not recognized as such in many of today’s churches.

Mary Magdalene is still being seen today as a prostitute when in fact there is no biblical evidence to support such a claim. There are also arguments about Mary being Jesus’s wife, but in my examination of scriptures and in my reading of Gnostic Gospels, I would have to say that such a claim is inconclusive and perhaps something that could and should be explored further, but this matter is beyond the scope of this newsletter article. So where did this claim of Mary Magdalene being a prostitute and a sinner originate?

The claim that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute originated in the 6th Century (591 AD) when Pope Gregory I (also known as Gregory the Great) confused Mary Magdalene with the woman who was crying while anointing Jesus’s feet. Pope Gregory authoritatively declared that the woman who was crying while anointing Jesus’s feet mentioned in Luke 7:36-50 was the same person as Mary Magdalene. In the same authoritative pronouncement, Pope Gregory also alluded to Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene as being the same person.

It is interesting to note that the Eastern Orthodox Church does not link the sinful woman described in Luke 7:36-50 with Mary Magdalene. Pope Gregory the First also interpreted the seven demons of which Mary Magdalene had been exorcised as a totality of vices; he asserted that the anointing of Jesus’s feet was somehow linked to the woman in Luke 7:36-50 perfuming her body for sensual purposes.

Mary Magdalene is a radical character in the New Testament—she was the first witness to the resurrection, and without her significant role in these events near the time of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection there would be no Gospel. I believe that as progressive Christians we must contemplate the Easter story from a feminist perspective. There is no Gospel without Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene was—not a prostitute but rather the first woman Apostle.
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Being an authentic and faithful progressive Christian
It could be said that the authentic Progressive Christian seeks to faithfully follow the teachings and actions of Jesus. But it’s not that simple. Existentialism, particularly as expressed by the ideas of Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre and Simone du Bouvrie can help us strengthen our authenticity as progressive Christians.

Criticisms of authenticity
Authenticity has been seen as narcissistic and inward-turning has been described as shallow and baseless. There has been concern about separating the individual from society. Sole dependence upon the self has been seen as questionable and lacking reliability. Further, in a dichotomy, authenticity has been seen as creating opposition to societal norms, being disruptive of culture and societal order. There is a real danger from a totally subjective, inward focus that has no real foundation.

Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s view of authenticity
Kierkegaard saw humankind in relational terms, both the relation to oneself and the relation to society, although he critiqued society as causing inauthenticity. He spoke of massification, homogenizing life, bringing it down to the lowest common denominator. There was a kind of spiritlessness. In the relationship with self and authenticity, Kierkegaard suggested that each of us is to become what one is. According to the Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy: That the self is defined by concrete expressions through which one manifests oneself in the world and thereby constitutes one’s identity over time. Further: ... is not a matter of solitary introspection, but rather a matter of passionate commitment to relation to something outside oneself that bestows one’s life with meaning. Also: The idea is that passionate care about something outside ourselves gives dichromic coherence to our lives and provides the basis for the narrative unity of this self...(Davenport). Kierkegaard, a Christian existentialist, believed that true authenticity is reached by giving ourselves to God. Most all of the other existentialists philosophers were atheists. For Kierkegaard, passion in living and decision-making was of critical importance for authenticity.

In Heidegger’s view, we exist for the sake of ourselves. We enact roles and express character traits that contribute to realizing an image of what it is to be human in our own life. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Existence has a directedness or purposiveness that imparts a degree of connection to our life stories.... It results from our competence in being members of a historical culture that we have mastered to a great extent in growing up into a shared world. A key concept is that we own (embrace) our choices, we make them our own, thus creating authenticity.

Heideggers’ concept of authenticity has little relation to modern pop psychology and its depiction of self as some fixed entity. Rather, the true self is fluid. It is an ongoing creation, constantly in progress, constantly unfolding. It is developing over a person’s lifetime. Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and Sartre speak of the creation of self through the decision-making. For Heidegger, one must first undergo a personal transformation in order to realize the capacity for authenticity. This involves the experience of intense anxiety, facing our own finitude, and hearing the call of conscience.

Sartre and du Bouvier
Sartre’s concept of authenticity was somewhat convoluted, but was corrected by de Beauvoir. Sartre had a radical idea of freedom: That we are always free to decide how to interpret a given situation and then to take action. By reaching beyond ourselves we reach transcendence, which approaches authenticity. Bad faith (a kind of self-deception, e.g., we are not free so we don’t have to choose) keeps us from reaching transcendence. Like Heidegger and Kierkegaard, he believed that one continually creates oneself through decision-making. Individuals are responsible not only for creating their identities over time but also for the way in which the world presents itself in their experiences. Authenticity requires having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation and it also is necessary to have lucidity regarding humankind’s basic ambiguity (uncertainty) in life.

Lucid recognition of the ambiguity of the human condition is the main idea behind de Beauvoir’s Ethics of Ambiguity. She takes over from Sartre and adds that each individual finds his or her reason for being in the concrete
realizations of freedom. However, one’s own freedom necessarily involves wishing freedom for all humans. When a dedication to freedom grasps its full implications, this freedom will be seen as a call for a future in which an unrestricted range of possibilities is open to all. The authentic individual is one who takes up the terrifying freedom of being the ultimate source of values, embraces it and acts with clarity and firmness. Authenticity requires individual courage in decision-making. This type of both inner and outer focus overcomes any criticisms of the subjective nature of authenticity and further reinforces the sense of a person being in the world. Further, it increases social solidarity.

**Conclusion: the authentic and faithful follower of Jesus**
Existentialism helps us to be a more authentic and faithful followers of Jesus. A previous article on Fredrich Nietzsche added joy and the act of affirmation of life to The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity. From Kierkegaard, we can add a passionate commitment to something greater than ourselves. He also emphasized the relational aspects of authenticity, both relationship to self and to the community of faith. Kierkegaard, like Heidegger and Sartre, spoke of creating oneself through decision-making. Progressive Christians see themselves as works in progress. We take seriously each decision, realizing that there is a cumulative effect in terms of who we are. This means that the true self (Heidegger) is not some static entity, not the essence of man, but rather evolves over time according to the decisions and actions we take. There is a fluidity. For Heidegger and for us, authenticity comes from owning (embracing) our decisions.

From Sartre, we are encouraged to transcend ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves, beyond our comfort level, beyond our present level of effectiveness and accomplishment. This directs us towards authenticity. Bad faith is acting against what we know to be true about our self. It is self-deception. An example would be telling ourselves that we can do nothing to help promote and achieve racial justice, therefore we won’t try. Sartre encourages us to be honest and not practice self-deception. This means to be alert to all the ways that we can deceive ourselves. We must discover our implicit bias.

From de Beauvoir, we are reminded that our freedom needs to include the freedom of others, tying us to the community of faith, fellow followers of Jesus. Being concerned for the freedom of others helps build community solidarity. Authenticity requires lucidity (clarity) regarding one’s existence, including societal structures of racism. Courage in decision-making is necessary.

Authenticity is dynamic, ever-changing. The true self, being a faithful progressive Christian, is fluid and ever-evolving, as we continue to take action and constantly increase our understanding who Jesus truly was and truly is.

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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.