

January 2023 | www.iucc.org | Join us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)!

OPEN AND AFFIRMING · JUST PEACE · GLOBAL MISSION · CREATION JUSTICE/GREEN FAITH

Two big events coming in January!



Graphic courtesy of Craig Tyrl



Winter Congregational Meeting

Sunday, January 29, at 12:30 p.m. (via Zoom)

IUCC will be conducting our annual Winter Meeting to approve the 2023 Budget. In order for us to conduct this meeting, we need a quorum of 25% of corporate members. Per our Bylaws, when the meeting is conducted electronically, there must be a [Budget Forum](#) at least 7 days beforehand to answer any questions about the budget.

Budget Forum: Sunday, January 22, at 12:30 p.m. (via Zoom)

Photos from "Look Up" Christmas Pageant on December 18th

It was heartwarming to watch the production of "Look Up" written and directed by our own Myrna Bohan and performed by our youth. The message - to look up during the busy holiday rush and consider the true meaning of Christmas - was very meaningful and thought-provoking. Thank you to our kids, parents, and choral interns for their hard work!



Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes & Pastor Sarah



Children's Choir debut on December 4th

Thank you to all the kids of the Children's Choir for their performance of Joy to the World, Oh Come All Ye Faithful, and Away in a Manger! Special thanks to Choir Director Wendy Wiebach, Coordinator Martha Mecartney, and our super IUCC musicians for bringing us all together!! *Photos & captions courtesy of MYP Co-Chair Lauren Louie*



Thank you, kids, for your voices, hard work, & willingness to give it a go!



Childrens Choir singing "Away in a Manger" - the kids and adults teamed up to perform.



Children's Choir performing on the big stage! Wendy and our super choir musicians kept things awesome in voice and movement!



Children's Choir leaders had some backstage fun



Jocelyne and Martha show the importance of body and voice



Children's Choir Coordinator Martha Mecartney organized everyone & even made a waffle brunch

From the Senior Pastor

by the Rev. Dr. Sarah Halverson-Cano, Senior Pastor



It's a new year and things are looking up! Both the flu and Covid hit my family (just a very hard-hitting influenza A for me *knock on wood*), and we're beginning 2023 in paradise. Everyone knows Hawaii is beautiful, but Kauai has an especially calming and peaceful effect on me. It feels like I come here to learn how to breathe again, slowly and intentionally

inviting the Spirit into my body to permeate my heart and quiet my mind. I am taking stock of 2022 and rejuvenating to embrace 2023. There's nothing more perfect than sunrises and early walks on the beach followed by watching my children squeal with glee as they jump in the pool or seek out swimming sea turtles in the gentle warm Pacific waters.

My family's coming out of illness parallels the way I feel about our church heading into a new year. 2022 was challenging in many ways. In fact, we've had several challenging years as we've dealt with an unprecedented amount of transition. Pastor Paul retired in 2019, our assistant Pastor Sarah was ordained and headed off to Brea that same year, the pandemic hit months later in 2020 and threw everything drastically off-kilter, closing the preschool for several months and losing the majority of our student population. I was called as your new pastor in the thick of it all, but even then we had no idea how long-lasting the effects of the pandemic would be. 2021 was all about coming back (or so we thought), but we didn't even return in person until the summer. Our Director of the Ministry with Young People came and left almost entirely within the context of our shut-down. We looked forward to 2022 to "Refresh, Reboot and Renew," and when I look back at everything we did this year despite our continued challenges I'm amazed! But it really was difficult as Pastor Steve retired amidst an already understaffed ministry. Our tech left in the fall, and so did the new administrator. How did we manage to pull off weekly Sunday morning worship and special new opportunities and celebrations like Evolution Sunday, Crepes on Easter Sunday, the summer series (Gospel on Broadway), an installation of your not-so-new pastor, and a preschool Refresh?

It's been a demanding but, surprisingly, really joyful year! Our preschool is finally bouncing (we not only have new students but a handful of new teachers that finally stuck after the challenges we faced in hiring), and the Refresh is incredibly exciting and very satisfying. Perhaps the

most joyful experience of all is the hiring of our new Administrative Pastor, our own Craig Tyr! He heeded the call to "Be the Change you wish to see" by throwing his name in the hat and making it very easy for us to say "Yes, please!" to welcome him officially on board and grow his ministry in an exciting way among us!

Yes, I felt the weight and darkness of Advent, but the light has come, the wait is over (and hopefully the illness is too) and we shall walk into this new year as Christmas people thankful and grateful and eager to embrace new opportunities before us!

And we have some new opportunities! One big one comes after months of observing, listening, discerning, dreaming and creating as we take a step into exploring what a new contemporary worship will look like during our 11am service. We surveyed the congregation, the choir did a survey, we held three worship exploration conversations, we looked at the 5-year strategic plan, and the worship and music ministry has begun to shape what a progressive contemporary service at IUCC might look like. We are sure that like our progressing faith, this will be a progressing service that will evolve as we experiment together. The intent of this different style of worship is to offer more diversity so people have choices, creative and evolving prayers, while exploring a different musical style that was originally created to attract Boomers and has now been so much a part of some Christian cultures that Gen Xers, millennials and the youngest among us have become accustomed to it.

You can expect a more secular sound and to hear guitars and see Chris on his cajon. The choir will only sing at the first service, but our musical community will have opportunities to participate and share their gifts in the new service.. For those who are worried: this won't be Praise Music, our theology will not be compromised. Rather, we will have a unique opportunity to offer a progressive contemporary service, which is all but absent in nearly all church settings. Knowing that so many of our newer members come from evangelical traditions, the sound will be familiar to them, but the spirit will be uniquely IUCC! After the success of our non-traditional summer, we feel very enthusiastic about revamping the second service and trying something new.

It is clear to us that we need to begin to see if there will

be any traction and so must have consistent services to see if we can begin to grow this service. So, beginning in February through Lent we will be “test driving” our contemporary second service at 11am. We encourage you to come check it out as we tap into God’s creative Spirit and “Behold—we do a new thing!”

I’m so excited to enter into this new year, refreshed by the carving out of rejuvenating time to re-fill the Spirit’s breath in mine. I am giddy with excitement to begin sharing in ministry (in a new way) with Craig Tyrl. I’m grateful beyond measure that I work with Dr. Christopher Peterson and our team of talented interns Thalia, Joy and Jaime, and our entire musical community! I’m thankful for our Preschool Director Irma and her team of talented teachers, and I can’t wait to see how the hard work done over the last two months by our volunteers led by Mark Willcox, Paul Feick and Tom Mason looks as 2023 begins! And we are all so fortunate for the continued faithfulness of our bookkeeper Heidi, who has shared the brunt of the weight of our staff challenges with me, always giving us her best. She, too, has spent hours volunteering with our Refresh scraping and texturing ceilings, helping with lighting and vacuuming more times than she can count! The staff and all of you, our amazing volunteers, are so committed that it’s no wonder we have survived these challenging years, but I sure am looking forward to this new year!

Thank you for stepping up, for giving so generously, for your faithfulness and your love and for sharing in the excitement as we welcome 2023 together!

Walking in the light of Christmas,

Pastor Sarah

Recent Baptisms



Baptism of Mira, Henry and Walter Burke-Wilding on December 22



Welcome to Siavash Fallah, the newest official member of IUCC and the Christian community! Pastor Sarah baptized Siavash on Christmas Day.

Photos from Advent Workshop and Snow Play on December 3



Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes

Photos from Chili Cook-off and Choir Concert on December 3

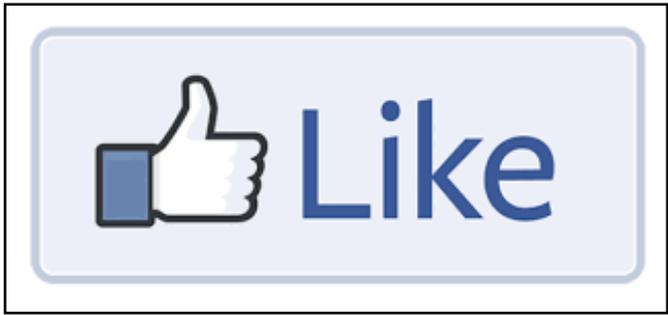


Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes



"Be the Change" Stewardship Campaign Update

From the Communications Team



The 2023 IUCC pledge campaign has reached 96% of our \$400,000 goal. Thank you to all those who have stepped up to invest in our church's coming year. We wish to extend a special thank you to those who went above and beyond and increased their pledges after their original pledge. We are still approximately \$16,000 short of our goal and we would gladly welcome any last minute pledges or year-end gifts. HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Most gratefully,

The IUCC Fund Development Committee
 Connie Jones and Duane Vajrjt, Co-Chairs

Happy 2023 everyone!!!! Have you made your New Year's Resolutions yet? Well, how about adding one more resolution? In 2023, try interacting with IUCC digitally at least once a week!

Did you know our Christmas Pageant only got 5 likes, our Christmas Eve service only got 2, and Christmas Day only got 5? Did you know that my photo of what I will be serving for coffee hour got 11 likes in 24 hours and a photo of Daisy napping on the couch got 8? When IUCC advertises our Winter Party on Facebook and I post another photo of 13 pounds of cuteness (Daisy), which do you think Facebook is more likely to show you?



If everyone takes just one minute a week to visit our social media pages (and website), you will increase our digital presence by simply clicking that like button! If you do not follow us on social media, then look for us. If you can't find us, then let us know the platform and how you searched for us because if you can't find IUCC, how will a stranger accidentally stumble upon us?

Let us all set a goal this year to make IUCC popular! It can start with simply visiting IUCC's pages and clicking that like button (and share)!

J. Alex Ingal
 Communications Co-Chair
 talktome@iucc.org

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 1/09 Jillian Allen | 1/26 Joan McDonald |
| 1/01 Richard Arguile | 1/18 Joan Mortenson |
| 1/13 Tricia Aynes | 1/10 Barbara Ruris |
| 1/22 Adele Bloom | 1/27 Chris Sanders |
| 1/01 Emily Cordes | 1/09 Cesar Sangalang |
| 1/18 Felicity Figueroa | 1/13 Bonnie Shaffstall |
| 1/09 Sarah Halverson-Cano | 1/18 Bill Sheak |
| 1/23 Nancy Harris | 1/19 Marilyn Smith |
| 1/05 Eric Houston | 1/02 Paul Strasma |
| 1/07 Janet Johnson | 1/12 Steve Swope |
| 1/20 Marilyn KeslerWest | 1/05 Chris Walsh |
| 1/23 Mary Lyons | 1/16 Melissa Walsh |
| 1/03 Ian McClement | 1/07 Jan Wilson |

Welcome to our new Administrative Pastor Craig Tyr!



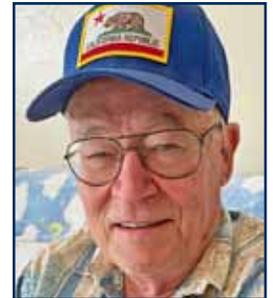
We are thrilled to announce our new Administrative Pastor: Craig Tyr! What a gift from God! As many of you know, Craig felt drawn to ministry as a young man and obtained a masters degree in theology. Discovering IUCC was a coming home experience for him, and in his 15 years here, he has been a blessing to our congregation. His heart continued to whisper, and when the opening for a new administrator and tech lead came up, Craig threw his name into the hat!

Why the Administrative Pastor title? Because of Craig's theology degree, his heart for ministry, his unique and greatly needed skill set, his inherent spiritual gifts, and the enormous responsibility involved in the position, we felt it was appropriate to honor him with a designation befitting his new role. Pastor Sarah spoke with the Southern Association and was told that because this is not a called position and Craig is not seeking ordination at this time, he need not go through the Association. What makes this a pastoral position is that there will be some pastoral care involved particularly as he will be the first point of interaction, he will have preaching opportunities, and his theological training will be helpful in the content he produces both in the technical aspect and in office administration.

We know you join in our excitement in welcoming Craig to his new role! He will officially begin on January 1, 2023.

The best Christmas Gift that IUCC could have!

This year they called him Santa Claus. After the Preschool Holiday Concert, the children and parents lined up to have their photos taken with him. In his jolly manner, he greeted and comforted them as the children sat with him for photos. He interacted with them and listened to their Christmas wishes. When each child left, he gave them candy canes. It was an enjoyable Christmas event and fun for all.



Under that red suit and white beard was an outstanding gentleman we have known for years. He's been active at IUCC, a professor at Fullerton State University, and founder and leader of *The Wayward Artist*. He also has an educational background in religious studies.

Friends and I have been lucky enough to win silent auction bids at *Wayward Artist* events for special meals to be catered by this gentleman. He provided our guests with outstanding dinners at our house in an entertaining and charming manner.

He showed remarkable skills with the non-profit group *The Wayward Artist*. He started with an idea and gathered and inspired others to join. In the process, he created an entity to produce entertainment and to employ young artist, actors, dancers, directors, and all the backstage crews. He has been a true inspiration to many.

Of course I am referring to Craig Tyr! I feel like his accepting the position of Administrative Pastor at IUCC was truly the best Christmas gift that IUCC could have.

Craig! Welcome as the Administrative Pastor at IUCC. I am sure you will, as usual, excel at this position. We look forward to seeing you in this important spot.

With much love and respect,

Jim Aynes

From the Moderator

by *Tricia Aynes*



What a wonderful Christmas we had at IUCC with our Advent Workshop, Snow Day, Chili Cook-Off, Choir Concert, Preschool Program, and Christmas Pageant! You can check out photos from all these events in the pages of this

newsletter. It was heartwarming to see everyone having such a good time.

With the holidays behind us, it's time to focus on the new year and what we can accomplish. IUCC is off to a wonderful start with the addition of Craig Tyrl as our new Administrative Pastor and Technology Leader!

We advertised the position, and six members of the Admin Board reviewed the applications and interviewed the top candidates. No other applicant had the breadth and depth of experience that Craig had. With his extensive work background, multiple skills and talents, and familiarity with our church and its congregation, Craig was the clear front runner. We are so thrilled that he felt the call to serve at the exact time we needed him most!

With Craig's permission, I am including a paragraph from his cover letter that explains a lot about the man and his character:

"In faith, I understand this opportunity as a calling. I have actively contributed to this congregation for over fifteen years. Currently, I chair the deacons, worship ministry, and the winter party committee. I'm also volunteering time in the audio/visual booth. My proudest accomplishment was my service on the pastoral search committee. I have a deep and abiding love for this community. As most of you know, my earliest career path was in religious life as an Augustinian friar. There is something marvelous about journeying the scenic route to this application. Things have gone full circle. My motivation is grounded in a faith that seeks service to our leadership team, members, and community. It is more than just a job."

Craig's varied and extensive resume includes being a restaurant manager and owner for over a decade, a theatre

professor at Cal State Fullerton, and the artistic director of The Wayward Artist (where he also functions as a small business owner). He has a great ability to multi-task and finish what he starts, plus he shows initiative and a willingness to take on new things.

I have worked with Craig on a number of projects over the years, and I've found him to be a kind and loving man with a beautiful soul. He's the sort of person who can light up a room and motivate others with his warm heart and enthusiastic spirit. I know he will bring a wealth of creativity to IUCC that will help our congregation bloom and thrive. Both Pastor Sarah and I could not be more thrilled and excited to welcome him to our staff. Thank you, God!

Winter Party on January 21

You won't want to miss our Winter Party, themed "There's No Business Like Snow Business - a Winter in New York." Entertainment will feature IUCC's best vocalists singing songs of the Big Apple and Broadway. Dinner will be catered by Stonefire Grill. The \$30 ticket price includes dinner and one cocktail. I hope to see you there!

Winter Congregational Meeting on January 29

Please mark your calendar now for our upcoming Winter Congregational Meeting on January 29 after second service. The meeting will be held electronically via Zoom per majority vote of both boards as permitted by our bylaws. You'll receive the Zoom ID info via e-blast the week before. We can't conduct the important business of this meeting (approval of the 2023 budget) without a quorum, so your attendance is especially important. Please plan to attend!

Budget Forum on January 22

Per our Bylaws, when we have an electronic Congregational Meeting, there must be a Budget Forum beforehand to answer any questions about the budget. IUCC Treasurer Chuck Heath will be on hand at this forum to provide context and answers. The Budget Forum will also be held via Zoom, and ID info will be provided via e-blast the week before.

In hope and optimism,

Tricia

Preschool Holiday Concert with Santa on December 9th

Photos courtesy of Tricia Aynes & Pastor Sarah



Halverson-Cano clan & Santa



It was a full house as proud parents came to watch!



Pastor Sarah and Preschool Director Irma Rosales



Preschool staff with Santa & Pastor Sarah

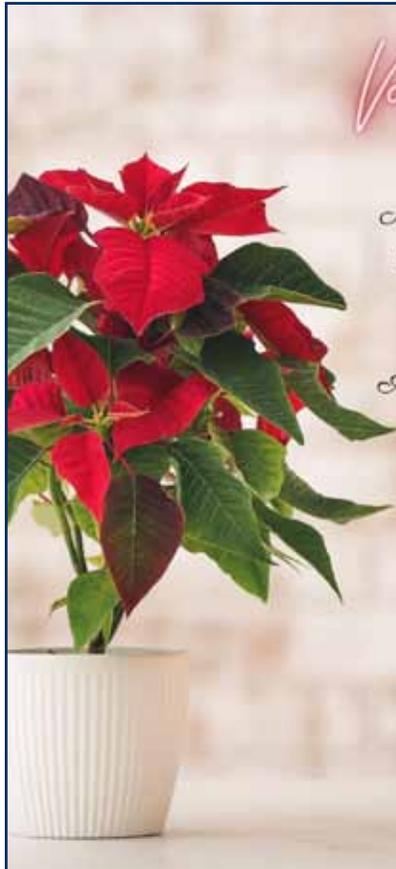


Pastor Sarah & Moderator Tricia got what they wanted from Santa - Craig Tyrl as Administrative Pastor!



Santa was a big hit with the kids!

Poinsettia Dedications



Poinsettia Dedications

Fricia Aynes in celebration of the Deacons
Myrna and Lisa Bonan in honor of Josephina Moreno Lugo
Maria Cavillo in honor of Janete Keenan La Montagne
John Emerson in honor of IUC
Felicity Figueroa in honor of Family
Alex and Jon Ingal in honor of Daisy "the cutest dog" Ingal
Marlene Gillespie in memory of John Gillespie
Harley Gimarino in honor of the IUC family
Steve Goetz in honor of his mother Betty
Janet Johnson for Maggi Wiata
Martha McCartney in memory of her parents
Donnie Meneo in honor of IUC
Martha and Lyle in celebration of families
Lyle Norton in memory of his parents



Poinsettia Dedications

Pastor Sarah in memory of Grandma Helen
Chris Peterson in gratitude for Craig Tyrl
Jaime Reza in dedication to his mom, Lorena Reza
Christine Roy in honor of Katherine Roy
Kimberly Ruppert in honor of IUC
Pat Sauter in love of family
Kathi Smith in memory of her parents and sister
Bob and Peggy Stalter in honor of Dave Mentzer
Cheryl Trobiani in honor of Moms and Dads
Craig Tyrl in celebration of the Deacons!
Jeff Benedick and Duane Vajgrt in honor of their mother Gloria
Heidi Willcox in memory of Erin Joyce and Danielle Bernard
Ken and Glenda Wyant in gratitude for their families!



Preschool Refresh Project Continues

by Pastor Sarah

Have you taken a look at our preschool lately? It was in need of some TLC, and thanks to some incredibly dedicated volunteers it's starting to look new again! You may know that our preschool building had a different life before it became the first building on our site. It was previously a bank building, and in the early 80's the Rev. Fred Plumer acquired it and plopped it on our land (at the time without permits) and he and others took the necessary steps to prepare it for ministry and become the IUCC Early Childhood Center. It's had very little upgrading over its 40 years among us. But this hand-me-down building has been refreshed, rebooted, and renewed in 2022.

Preschool Director Irma Rosales and Pastor Sarah realized knew we needed to do something to attract new parents. Up until September, all tours of the school took place by Zoom. Irma tried for creative and selective viewing, so as to hide the old paint, cracks in the wall and strange indent at the ceiling, but when the parents came in-person, she couldn't control what they would see. It became clear we needed to do something.

Unfortunately, the pandemic didn't exactly leave us with lots of cash for a remodel. However, we are a congregation with heart and creative thinking, and fortunately some real handy people, and we envisioned a plan that would enable us to get the work we needed done over a period of time. Many hands came together to make light work of scraping, and our talented few picked up some paint brushes, our lead Mark Willcox put in new lighting and Paul Feick was a master at finishing. We are coming to the close of our first phase and are very excited to share with you the progress made.

With Mark Willcox as the lead on our project, partnering very closely with Paul Feick and Building & Grounds Chair Tom Mason and volunteers like Paul Strasma, Chuck Heath and many others, we've seen a real transformation! To date a team of volunteers, and even our own preschool teachers (ranging from no skill to very skilled) has:

- scraped the ceilings, painted and added trim, as well as replaced lighting in all three of our original classrooms, the office and hallway. updated the paint in the toddler room to match the rest of the school,
- repurposed lighting in "the dungeon" (aka the supply room) where it was previously very dark.

The improved lighting makes a huge difference when doing laundry or getting supplies.

- Fixed electrical throughout the building (especially critical in the large classroom where exposed external wiring was moved and hidden). Light switch moved in boy's bathroom to a more logical location. Broken electrical outlets replaced, all of the covers are now new.
- Removed and replaced lighting and fans in both bathrooms and painted them, leaving them looking so much bigger and cleaner!
- Brought in new (to us) office furniture that looks incredible, giving a very clean and inviting look to the entryway which is so important as it's the first thing new parents see as they enter our school.

All work done on the classrooms has taken place after 6pm on the weekdays and on the weekends when the school is closed. This holiday week has been a crucial time to get work done, though some of our faithful and talented volunteers were unavailable. We are incredibly grateful for the sponsorship of a skilled worker who has worked with our team this week. This generous donation helped us to finish this phase of the Refresh so we are ready to start the new year prepared for our annual licensing visit and prepared to welcome back our families as we invite new ones to join us.

Thanks to the hard work of our volunteers we have saved thousands of dollars. We received a painting bid at \$11,000, ceiling scraping at \$5000 and while we did not get bids on the lighting and electrical, we know it would have been very pricey. We've currently spent about \$5000 (taken from the 2022 miscellaneous line item of the preschool budget).

In the new year, we hope to address the flooring, and replace broken cabinets and countertops as capital improvements to be spread out over several years. It is truly incredible what can be done when we put our minds to it, when we give of time and talents. We can never thank these volunteers enough! Thank you Mark Willcox (and family), Paul Feick, Tom Mason, Paul Strasma, Chuck Heath, and those who came in to scrape and paint. You've literally transformed our church with your own hands!

See next page for photos of all the progress being made!!

Preschool Refresh Photos



Mission and Service Ministry Projects and Activities

These are some projects that Mission & Service has done during the month of December and accomplished through the generosity of our IUCC congregation. Our Ministry work is totally dependent upon your collaboration with us!

Families Forward Gift Collection

This year, IUCC adopted four families who were clients of Families Forward, two having a single parent and two headed by two parents, for the purpose of collecting and presenting presents to children for Christmas. All of the families are experiencing financial difficulties, so we included wrapping paper in the bag of gifts requested by the children so the parents could enjoy wrapping the gifts for their own children. We also presented the parents with gift cards for gas or groceries.

This year, members of the congregation signed up for ALL the gift requests on the first Sunday M&S sat at a table to advertise the gift-giving program. This is a first since the program was instituted.

New Beginnings Support for Afghan Refugees

The goal of our consortium of four churches regarding Afghan refugee families is to support them in their goals to be self-sustaining. One of the consortium members is providing *pro bono* legal assistance with immigration matters and one has provided budget guidance.

We have helped some family members to enroll in career programs at community colleges and to apply for financial aid. Next semester, family members will be studying Early Childhood Development & Education, Dental Hygiene, Construction Tech, and Security Guard Certification. Three teenagers in the families are enrolled in high school, and everyone is learning English.

Many of our congregants have donated kitchen appliances and furniture to these families, and we have accumulated an emergency fund for rent and health needs.

Finally, with help from Google, T-Mobile, and Sabil USA, we have distributed phones, 12 months of free phone service, and reconditioned MacBook Pros to the families.

Concern America

We hosted Concern America on the first Sunday of December. This is the organization that sells arts and crafts from artists in Central America and Mexico to directly

benefit those artists. Their major concerns are potable water, income generation, health care, and education in these poorer countries. This year, unfortunately their sales (\$668) were almost exactly half of the sales generated last year.

Knitters of Regents Point

Jan Wilson, a member of IUCC and a consistent supporter of the work of Mission & Service, brought several bags of warm beanies and booties, knitted lovingly by a group at Regents Point. These handmade gifts will be distributed by Isaiah House guests, who also lack permanent housing, to unsheltered individuals and families in Santa Ana.

Toiletries for Women in Prison

Mission & Service has been collecting toiletries for the 951 inmates in the California Institute for Women for several years. St. Mark Presbyterian Church has been helping your toiletry donations by making gift packets for the incarcerated women. A former inmate told Felicity Figueroa how much these toiletries mean to the women there, letting them know that they aren't forgotten. These items are luxuries they don't often have.

- by Steve Goetz on behalf of the M & S Ministry



One of the families our consortium is helping

Gifts

by Vivian Elaine Johnson



I settled into the Amtrak seat, pushed the button to lean back, plunked my feet on the footrest, and emitted a sigh of relief. I had looked forward to the three-hour train trip to my daughter's home for Christmas. Now, nicely situated, I gave myself permission to veg out. With drooping eyelids, I watched the passing landscape of palm and olive trees with the realization that my

dangly snowman earrings were incongruent with the scenery. I sleepily let my thoughts go free-range. I noticed that the train made no clickety-clack sound like the trains of my childhood, but rumbled instead. It still emitted the sound of a horn when approaching and passing-through towns and cross roads. Some things don't change. Others do. Rather than go to the train depot to purchase a ticket, I had made my reservations online and printed out my ticket in my own home.

My thoughts turned to a Christmas of the past . . .

It was Christmas Eve. When it was my turn to open a gift, I chose a package wrapped with wrinkled paper and exceedingly abundant scotch tape. The tag said it was from my husband and our daughters.

"Oh, thank you for the beautiful present," I said. "Such fancy gloves. Wow, they're leather and lined with fur." *Not so useful in Southern California*, I thought, *but I can wear them if we go to the mountains this winter.* The girls and George urged me to try them on. As I tried to slip my hand into a glove, something hindered me. I pulled it out: it was a plane ticket. A two-way ticket for one – me! The destination was Minneapolis where my parents lived. Departure was for the next morning, Christmas Day! I looked into the misty eyes of my excited family and joined their tears in gratitude for their loving gift and in great anticipation of seeing my parents.

The gift of a visit was a surprise to me, but also to my parents, I learned. My brother John was visiting them from New York and collaborated with George for the surprise. John told my parents that he would be gone for a couple hours because he was meeting a friend for the evening. Instead, he met me at the airport, drove to our parents' home, rang the doorbell and walked in with me hidden behind him. Dad spotted me first; he rose from his chair by bracing himself on its arms, and bellowed, "For cryin' out loud!" Mother appeared glued to the couch in disbelief, but excitedly said in a higher than usual voice, "Vi-vi-an. It's Vivian!"

A week of being embraced in my childhood home surrounded by the love of my parents and by mounds and mounds of piled snow was one of the best, most thoughtful gifts of my life. I can assure you that the gloves came in handy.

~ ~ ~

The conductor, with a big smile and bigger belly, interrupted my thoughts, "Would you like something to drink? Water, wine, juice?"

"Sure, I'll take a bottle of water. The wine would make me sleepier than I already am."

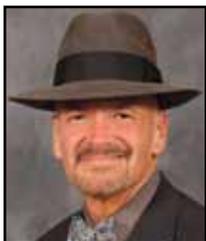
Sufficiently hydrated, I returned to my recalling of the past. The Christmas of my husband's last year of life came to mind. Ambivalent feelings accompanied those thoughts. A pang of sadness pinched my heart as I recalled George's last gift to me. Clearly, it was due to his dementia that he chose to give me two small wooden pull-toys: one a bunny and the other a duck, two gifts for toddlers. I was puzzled but I hid my question-mark eyes and thanked him with perhaps a little bit of overdone enthusiasm. He gave a small smile of satisfaction and said, "They're cute."

As I napped from the lull of the rumbling train, a weepy thought percolated to the surface: George's final gift was one of the best gifts of my life.



A Spiritual Perspective About New Year's Resolutions

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



Every new year in the past, I made resolutions that evaporated by the time Valentine's Day rolled around. Has this been your experience too? This year I am going to try something different, manageable, and yet spiritual in nature. I have therefore assembled a list of ten suggestions that I hope you may find helpful as you embrace 2023.

Daily Quiet Time. In his book *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (1966), Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that "... morning prayer determines the day." (p. 64). My understanding of Morning Prayer is about taking time to unplug and be still in the presence of God (cf. Psalm 46:10). In my experience, keeping things simple is of paramount importance. A prayer can be the simple act of thinking of something or someone greater than we are, the Power of Creation. In the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, written about three hundred years ago, Brother Lawrence (i.e., Nicolas Herman, c. 1614 - 1691), a Carmelite monk, states that prayer should be something simple. The day has 24 hours which is 1,440 minutes. Taking 5 minutes a day to decompress and get centered is manageable and can be done while we are drinking our coffee in the morning and visiting with God. It can be developed into a healthy habit. It is spiritual nourishment.

Keeping a Gratitude Journal. An attitude of gratitude is one way we can get out of the bondage of self. Being grateful for each day God has created, with an attitude of gratitude (cf. Psalm 118:24) is the best way to start our journaling. I have found it very helpful to keep a tiny journal that fits in my pocket. I write at least two to three things that I am grateful for. For example, as I am writing this newsletter article I am grateful to be able to share my insight about resolutions with you.

Thinking of a Personal Mission. I have found much healing by shifting from being goal-focused to pondering the meaning of my life as a Divine Creation. I often ask myself who I want to be rather than what I want to do.

Learning to Discern. A spiritually driven life is one that allows me to be still (cf. Psalm 46:10) and pause (Selah/ **הַסֵּף**) when I have big decisions to make and pay attention to whether or not I feel at peace and whether or not my actions align with my values. Sometimes, predicting an

outcome is statistically uncertain before a choice is made. So I practice discernment, that is, allowing myself Sacred Space to grow, make mistakes and experience renewal. I have discovered that finding the courage to discern is a function of faith (cf. Hebrews 11:1).

Seeking Spiritual Guidance. When I struggle with the vicissitudes of life, I have found that speaking with a godly friend and someone who is trustworthy—a spiritual director or a clergy person—helps me in finding clarity in the midst of a given situation or life event.

Practicing Ignatian Daily Self-Examination. Ignatius of Loyola developed a method of daily reflection that encourages awareness, forgiveness, and hopefulness. This method of Self-Examination provides a way of assessing how to respond to the challenges and blessings of the day. It allows me to experience the presence of God and produces opportunities for deeper growth. This process allows me to review my actions at the end of the day and take an inventory as a way to see where I could improve and yet be forgiving of myself.

Finding Accountability. I have found that reaching out to a godly trusted friend who is kind and gentle has helped me stay accountable and true to myself. Everyone needs a friend with whom we can share our struggles.

Creating a Vision Poster. In my own spiritual journey, I have found that images help me along the way and remind me that I am making progress. Having visuals has helped me in staying the course. Affirmations as well as pictures are subtle reminders. I have collected some of my favorite verses or proverbs to post in areas that I see every day to stay connected and practice continuous prayer (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:17) and conversation with the God of my understanding.

Believing. A positive outlook and mindset can help in any endeavor. It is helpful to believe in oneself and to leave results in the hands of God. I believe that with God's grace in tandem with my dedication, good things can happen.

Practicing Self-Forgiveness and Self-Love. Life is not perfect and goals are not set in stone. Flexibility is the key, and this means that our goals as a function of resolutions are fluid and subject to readjustment. Self-forgiveness and self-love are about flexibility not rigidity because the former is about love, the latter is about the disease of perfectionism.

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The Great Bike Adventure of 2007

by *Tricia Aynes*



I hadn't intended to buy my 20-something daughter a bike for Christmas that year, but she had her heart set on it. Alia believed in saving the environment, and it bothered her to pollute the air by driving a car. She'd seen a bike she especially liked at Costco, an "Aloha" model that had big colorful Hawaiian flowers painted on its shiny surface.

What's important to know is that ever since she was a very little girl, Alia has always had a very clear idea of what she wanted. She could see it in her mind's eye, right down to the tiniest detail. It has been a defining trait just as much as her brown eyes, her artistic flair, and her intense spirit. Over time, she'd learned how to mask this trait somewhat, trying to hide her distress if she didn't get what she'd pictured, but it remained just below the surface.

As Christmas drew nearer, Jim and I got to talking about how far Alia had come and how great it was that she'd decided to return to college. We decided to get her a bike after all as a reward for getting her life back on track and working so hard that semester to get straight A's.

Jim and his brother John started bike shopping the next day and found a beautiful purple one (her favorite color) at a shop near John's house. Later that same day, we drove around to various Costco stores to see if there were any "Aloha" bikes left. No luck. We decided to buy the purple one at the bike shop and hope it would please her.

Christmas morning arrived, and the shiny purple bike was sitting near the tree when Alia got up. She didn't seem terribly excited by it, but didn't seem disappointed either. We thought we were in the clear. But about an hour later, she approached me and asked if we could talk. "Mom, the bike you got me is nice, but I really don't like it. It looks like a little kid's bike. I really liked the Aloha one at Costco. Would you mind terribly if we got that one instead?"

I was impressed that she'd handled the matter quietly and tactfully and told her so. "Sure," I said, "but it will depend on whether or not we can return the purple one to the shop and get our money back."

It was easier said than done. We called the shop the next day, only to be told their policy was to allow returns for store credit only. This presented a problem, since the Aloha bike had more "bells and whistles" and would probably cost more at the small shop than it had at Costco. 18

The following morning, we loaded the purple bike back into the car and drove to the shop to see what could be done. Uncle John came too. Alia really appreciated that all of us were there to back her up. "That's what family is really all about – we're willing to humor each other's quirks," she said with self-deprecating humor. We all laughed, because she had described the situation perfectly.

The shop was closed, and Jim and I had to catch a plane the next day. John said he'd accompany her to the shop the next Saturday in our stead, and he was true to his word. That afternoon, Alia called me full of excitement.

"I got the bike I wanted! The guy was so nice – he had the Aloha bike at the shop, and even though it was lots more expensive than the purple bike, he agreed to let me have it for only \$10 more than what you paid for the purple one! Oh Mom, I'm so happy!" She went on to explain that Uncle John had said just the right things: he'd told the man that he was a local resident and that he'd brought his brother by to check out bikes for his niece. He'd explained about the Aloha bike at Costco and how much Alia wanted that one. He'd said he realized the shop had a store credit return policy and admitted it was entirely our problem, but asked very nicely if there was anything the shop could do to help. Alia marveled at how calmly, tactfully, and reasonably her uncle had presented her case.

The bike shop manager responded that he was aware of the disparity of price between the two stores and was unhappy that the manufacturer had sold the bikes for different prices to different vendors. But he wanted his customers to be happy, and he was willing to make the swap and deal with the manufacturer later.

Alia got the bike she wanted, but more importantly, she learned something about what it means to be family. "Mom, I'm so grateful that you and dad got me the bike I wanted and were willing to humor me by trying to exchange the other one," she said. "And I'm so thankful to Uncle John for going to the shop with me when you couldn't. I think that's what family is all about – supporting each other even when one of you is being a brat. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I was really impressed by how well John dealt with the manager, and in the future, I'm going to try to handle things like he did."

It was a good Christmas after all, and I think each of us learned something important. When you have a family like mine - each of us with our own eccentricities - the ability to accept and validate one another's emotions can be a powerful way to demonstrate love. We got to show our love by humoring Alia and advocating on her behalf. I think that's what family (and friendship) is all about.

Talking About Religion with a Fundamentalist or Pentecostal Christian

by The Reverend Doctor Jerry von Talge

Member, Diversity & Inclusion Ministry and Member, Advocates for Peace & Justice Ministry



Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

(Matthew 22: 37-40)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

(1 Corinthians 13: 1-3)

The Problem

Is it possible to talk about religion with a fundamentalist or Pentecostal Christian? What about friends whose Christian beliefs differs from yours? How can you avoid conflict when they bring up their religious beliefs that are contrary to those of progressive Christianity?

The answer is yes and no. It is possible to do so for a short time, but not for any extended conversation. I have discovered a way to talk briefly to almost any Christian about faith, avoiding the many landmines that exist. This method is not fool-proof, however.

Fundamentalist Christians may express strongly-held beliefs and profess that you will not be able to go to heaven if you do not share them. Others may say that we are saved by the blood of Christ. These beliefs are usually not held by many progressive Christians. Pentecostals make similar statements, adding such phrases as "Jesus be praised" and "God be praised." How will you respond when such statements are made?

The Christian fundamentalist movement in American Protestantism arose in the late 19th century in reaction to theological modernism, which aimed to revise traditional Christian beliefs and to advance new developments in natural and social science, especially the theory of biological evolution. Fundamentalists firmly believe in the literal truth and accuracy of every word in the Bible, including the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, resulting in original sin. They believe that because of this original sin, it was necessary for God to sacrifice his son, Jesus Christ, in order to redeem us from our sins, and we are only saved (meaning that we will only go to heaven) by believing that Jesus Christ is our Lord and savior. Further, they believe in the imminent and physical second coming of Jesus Christ. They believe that the virgin birth actually took place and that the physical resurrection of Jesus has brought us atonement or salvation.

Pentecostalism is a form of Christianity that emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct experience of the presence of God. Pentecostals believe that faith must be powerfully experiential and not something found merely through ritual or thinking. Pentecostalism focuses on the Book of Revelation, especially on both religious expression and on the second coming of Christ and the end of the world, when God will judge who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Some Pentecostal Christians speak in tongues - speech that is unintelligible to other people.

Most progressive Christians find it extremely difficult to talk about religion with fundamentalists and Pentecostal Christians. I have discovered a way to talk with them without getting into a loggerhead argument or religious dispute. This is definitely a religious minefield which is almost impossible to avoid unless this strategy is employed. Even then, the conversation must be kept short.

A Suggestion for Positive Religious Dialog

Fundamentalist Christian: "I believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and savior and we are only saved by our sins if we believe in the blood of Christ. We will only get to heaven by believing that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior."

Pentecostal Christian: "I believe in the second coming of Christ, when the world comes to an end, and God will judge who will be lifted up to heaven and who will go down to hell."

Progressive Christian: "These things are important (to you), but I believe Jesus' great commandment on love is the true test of whether or not one is a Christian. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that if you have not love you have nothing, including a true faith in Jesus."

"I like the fact we both believe in Jesus and want to follow his teaching and his actions so that we might be more like him. More than anything, I want to be faithful to all that Jesus said and did. My mission in life is to spread Jesus' agape love."

It will be very difficult for any self-professed Christian to disagree with these statements about love and Jesus.