

Dear Church,

November 3, 2020

As I write this on Election Day 2020, I do so with a great sense of appreciation for the powerful ways that our church has participated in history. Both our local congregation and our wider denomination have always risen to the occasion to be “a church of firsts.” Not only was the United Church of Christ the first group of Christians since New Testament times to ordain a person of color, a woman, and an openly LGBT person—our congregation here in La Jolla was the first church to close for the COVID-19 pandemic and the first and only mainline Protestant church in the Village to boldly use our building to proclaim that “Black Lives Matter.” Taking both of those actions before anyone else was a bold way that we witnessed to the world that we seek to always stand on the right side of history.

As we enter stewardship season in preparation for the 2021 calendar year, this letter and this stewardship campaign will prove to be very different from any past year.

It feels like ages ago, but March 8 was the last service held inside our beloved 1216 Cave Street location. I preached about how hand washing should be our new lenten practice in 2020. We laughed, we prayed, we had hope. I had no idea then that we were on the brink of a pandemic that would rob people of their health, lives, businesses, and financial security.

After the service, we celebrated International Women’s Day by watching “RBG”—the documentary detailing the life and career of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In those 8 months since, RBG has passed into the communion of saints and has already been replaced on the bench, while our country has had its greatest reckoning on race since the Civil Rights Movement, and we contend daily with making meaning out of this confusing new reality.

I believe that the church is more relevant today than ever before. Church has been largely the same for the past century. This past March, Nina, Bronwyn, and I were faced with the nearly impossible task of totally re-imagining our church’s centuries-old Christian worship format and transforming it into an asynchronous, virtual, online product. We had two days to make this transition. I am proud of what we have done. Our worship packet is distributed to over 225 people in several states and 4 countries. My primary objectives were that no one would be left behind, that worship would be accessible to all ages, that it would be available without significant technical skill, and that it could be done in the safety of home.

All the while the church continued its mission in the community. I continue to serve as a co-chair of the Southern Association Church and Ministry Committee of the Southern California Nevada Conference where we helped purchase 9 laptops for the San Diego Marshallese UCC Church so that they could worship virtually and connect to Zoom in the same way we do. I helped mentor a new clergywoman into the United Church of Christ and am currently working with a local congregation that is interested in becoming a part of our denomination. Additionally, I continue to write editorials for the *La Jolla Light* as well as *Times of San Diego*. I participated in the Black Lives Matter “chalk-up” events at the Fay Avenue Bike Path that the City of San Diego recently designated as protected speech. I also have met with and listened to community organizers who are working for racial justice in La Jolla. I have supported their effort to get the La Jolla and the Parks and Beaches Board to recognize the importance of this moment in creating social equality and racial equity. Our work has received a great deal of positive attention. Here are the words of one neighbor:

I wanted to take the time to tell you thank you. Thank you for using your platform to speak up. Thank you for your Black Lives Matter signs outside of your church. Thank you for the beautiful opinion you wrote in the Times

of San Diego. It is during these times that we cannot be silent. I have so much respect for you that you are not silent. Being married to a Black woman I see firsthand the pain my wife goes through when she reads articles opinions from the La Jolla Light that are racist and hateful.

And then we received another:

I am writing you to say I have been very touched by your words and expressions on a variety of topics from Black Lives Matter to COVID-19. Your general inclusiveness, civility and discernment in these challenging times is inspiring and greatly needed. I have spoken with friends about how much we would enjoy joining you whenever it is safe to do so at your Church. We are a group of La Jollans who continue to march, write letters and engage socially for equality and racial equity.

As difficult as 2020 has been, the church has been witnessing to Christ's love in La Jolla. Unfortunately, like so many small businesses, our church's renters have seen their revenue all but totally evaporate. This has left us with a significant hole in our income stream.

Additionally, our church has lost nearly a quarter of its pledging members to life transitions, retirement to other states, death, new ventures abroad, or the desire for a change of scenery. And while the church has welcomed several new members, it generally takes five years to replace the lost pledge of a faithful giver. The loss of our rental income has made the absence of these generous members felt in significant ways. Additionally, the church is not being used for weddings, events, or other large-scale meetings as it was pre-pandemic.

The church's closure to in-person worship is not related to this decline in income in any way. Our members and friends have been diligent with their generosity and many have moved to online giving. Often I get the question about when we will be back to "normal." The answer to that is: none of us knows. However, it is safe to say that we will be worshiping in our present virtual form for much of 2021, until we have a COVID-19 vaccine and treatment. We do this out of respect for many of our members who cannot leave their homes as well as the nearly 95% of this congregation who are in a high-risk group. **At the end of this, we will be able to confidently say: no one got sick by coming to church.**

Our building closure is not the reason for our struggle. Simply, the church's reliance on its rental income and the loss of several members to new opportunities has led us to an unsustainable present reality. With much gratitude to the federal government's Paycheck Protection Plan as well as the use of reserves, the church will make it through 2020.

Additionally, the church's other cash reserves proved to be a blessing to us pre-pandemic when we were in need of an urgent roof repair.

Aside from our historic building, the church's only remaining asset is its nearly \$480,000 endowment fund which is the product of years of member generosity. This fund represents the great love had by so many for this church. The primary purpose of an endowment is so that we have a steady stream of interest income for use in our yearly budget. We are fortunate that our endowment produces nearly \$25,000 for the church annually. Many churches draw from their investments in times of great need such as this one. I had thought that our endowment would provide the church adequate protection in the case of a situation

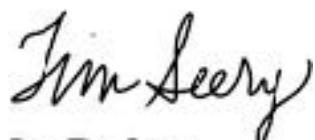
such as this. However, while we continue to work with the Southern California Nevada Conference attorney to investigate the possibilities for this money, it is looking like we will be unable to use it. Most true endowments are governed by laws and stipulations that prevent the principal from being spent. The many saints who gave to the endowment did so with the understanding that their investment would be perpetually protected and would produce income for the church forever.

While I am grateful for the generosity of these saints of past, I am also a bit regretful that they didn't consider the ways that not only church, but culture, our country, and community, would demographically transform and that resources of the past could provide tangible ministry if given in an unrestricted means. Since then, La Jolla has transitioned over the past century into being a town of tourism, with the average California family priced out. **If you have remembered the church in your estate, I would encourage you to allow your gifts to be unrestricted and untied to our endowment so that your legacy can produce tangible ministry for us when we need it most.**

In the meantime, we press onward in the way of our forebears in faith. This stewardship season will be one of our most critical and I am grateful for your continued generosity.

Instead of a pledge goal, this year I hope our focus might be a bit different. I want to see 100% participation in this year's stewardship drive. Even if the amount you pledge is \$1 or \$2 a week, participating in the work of the church is what counts. **There is no pledge that is too small.** What counts is that each one of us participates in the future of the church. I have faith that we will continue to provide La Jolla with a progressive clearinghouse for faith, reason, and intellectual exploration. May we be the hands and feet of Christ in La Jolla.

With grace,



Rev. Tim Seery