



Subject: 2020 Annual Report & Year in Review

Dear Church,

It has been almost a year since I have led an in-person worship service at the Congregational Church of La Jolla. My last sermon was early in Lent last year when I encouraged hand washing as an appropriate Lenten practice. I have attached that sermon to this email. In that message, I reminded all of you that our hands are holy and that during a Lenten usually marked by the ritual act of foot washing, we might pivot and take up the art of hand washing instead. At the time we chuckled at this idea and prayed that a little more hand washing might vanquish this “novel” virus coming to us from afar.

Since then we have learned more than we could have ever imagined about public health, human behavior, aerosols, health, safety, and the interconnected web of human life. We have consumed an impressive amount of information, heard countless stories of suffering, job loss, death, and readjusted our lives in profound ways. Our lives changed this year and with it so did our church. Our Lenten journey last year began a walk through the desert that none of us could have ever anticipated.

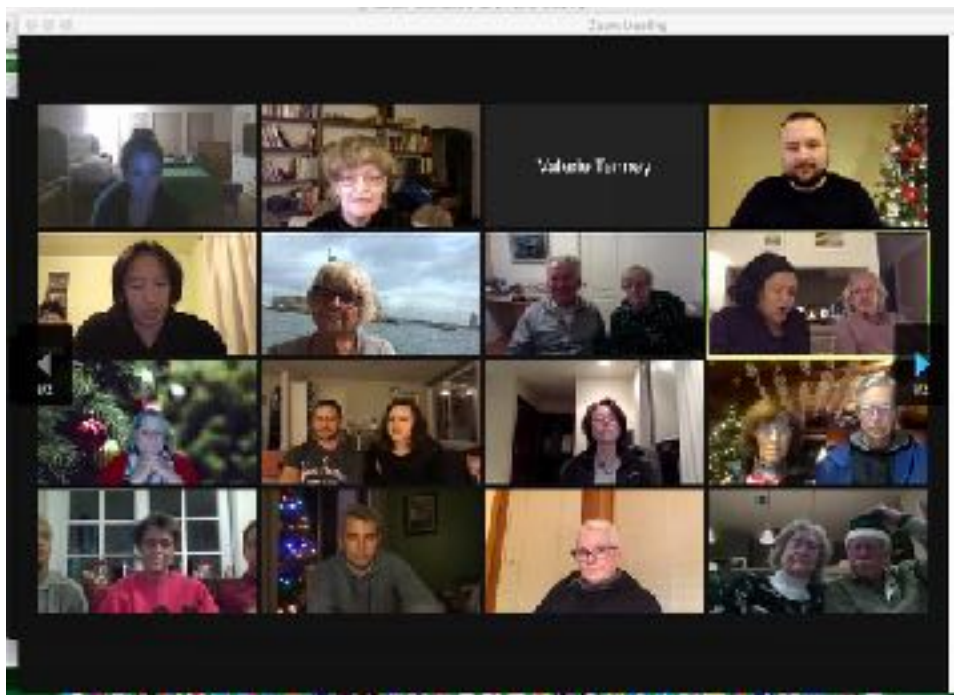
It feels like a long time ago, but our church started 2020 with an impressive interfaith dinner at Congregation Beth El where we joined with St. Peters Episcopal Church in Del Mar for an evening of conversation and a discussion with Richard Reinhard Krause, the Executive Director of The Academy for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies at UCLA. Recently, Rabbi Ron, Rev. Paige and I met over Zoom to plan a virtual Holy Week gathering between our three communities where we will have a chance to reflect with each other about the lessons we have learned in 2020. Even a global pandemic cannot deter our efforts to be engaged in interfaith dialogue. Stay tuned for information about this important opportunity!

I have been impressed that despite the upheaval of this year, the work of the church continues. Some things have changed in interesting ways: I now spend a minimum of 12 hours a week on Zoom meetings, I send double the amount of emails, and sometimes more than three hundred text messages a day. I have presided at a family-only grave side service, and a Zoom/YouTube memorial service: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhNQRBma_pl&t

We managed to have the same, if not greater attendance at this year's Christmas Eve service than we had at the previous year's. Our worship "attendance" has almost doubled and our weekly worship is sent out to an email list of nearly 300. Church members who moved away in past years have rejoined us virtually and are now a part of the congregation more than ever

before. We also have gathered on Sunday afternoons for "Virtual Happy Hours" on Zoom where we check in with each other and discuss our week's and our lives.

Through technology, I have been able to continue to work on behalf of the Southern Association of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ as one of the chairs of the Church and Ministry Committee. I



Christmas Eve Service 2020

have led 10 meetings this past year alongside mentoring the pastor of the San Diego Marshallese UCC Church, mentoring a candidate for privilege of call, overseeing an ecclesiastical council, and working on setting up official Association recognition of a church consultancy ministry. I realize I just used a lot of insider lingo in this last paragraph—but all of this is to say that COVID-19 has not slowed the church down by any means.

As of the time of writing this, your church staff has crafted 51 at home worship experiences that include custom music, vocal solos, sermons, and a different theme, experience, or virtual field trip. I also started a YouTube channel to widen the scope of our reach and the videos so far have received an average of 170 views and a combined total of 678 views across only 4 videos. 2021 will continue to provide me a canvas to continue exploring this new medium of ministry. You can visit my YouTube channel by clicking here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw9PC2xRzer8N6-OggWabNw>

Our church has also been blessed with the generosity of those who have come before us. A few weeks ago the church received \$5,000 from the Marjorie E. Swacker Trust and in December the church received an unrestricted gift of \$100,000 from the Estate of Bob and Elizabeth Aujla. Prior to the close of 2020 the church received donations from many first time givers from across the country who donated out of appreciation for the church's digital

outreach this past year. I have been impressed that a small but mighty church such as ours can be even mightier in the digital world. Our church's pandemic-time ministry was even featured in the San Diego Reader: <https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2020/apr/24/sheep-quarantined-through-eyes-sir-isaac-newton/>

2020 also marked a significant milestone in that I became involved in the Black Lives Matter movement for racial equity. Our Board of Trustees voted to place "Black Lives Matter" signs on the exterior of the church—making us the only church in La Jolla to do so. I participated in the La Jolla BLM peaceful protest and wrote articles for the La Jolla Light and the Times of San Diego highlighting the church's support for this movement: <https://timesofsandiego.com/opinion/2020/06/05/opinion-why-i-put-a-black-lives-matter-sign-on-my-la-jolla-church/>

While our original signs were stolen, we were quick to replace them, securing them above the door to our sanctuary. After we did this, several community members took note and wrote the church emails of support and gratitude. Here is an excerpt from one such email: "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 CO-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."



Above: Our original BLM signs, quickly stolen.

And another:

"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



Right: Our front door features a "QR Code" that can connect to passerby's phones and digitally deliver our worship packets to them.

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."

I met with several community members who grew concerned about racist comments made by two La Jolla Parks and Beaches board members in relation to the chalk-up event at the La Jolla bike path. After attending a chalk up event and meeting with more community members I became an active advocate in La Jolla for racial equity. I was asked to represent the community on the La Jolla Parks and Beaches board as they worked to draft a new code of conduct for their members. We wrote to Council Member Joe La Cava, San Diego's newly elected Mayor, Todd Gloria, and members of our group have met with these important city officials to discuss our concerns.

In December 2020/January 2021, I wrote an op-ed in the La Jolla Light directed at La Jolla Parks and Beaches silence and inaction in the light of these racist comments: <https://www.lajollalight.com/news/opinion/story/2021-01-03/guest-commentary-la-jollans-must-not-let-silence-of-inaction-further-marginalize-members-of-our-community>

Ever since I have been met with requests for conversation from several community members, board members, and city officials. I never intended to begin such an intense stint of community involvement and advocacy but the Spirit has led me to it. I have learned a lot this year about La Jolla, community government, and how San Diego works. I am grateful that you allow me the freedom to speak prophetically about these important justice issues and I am grateful that you see this as an important part of our church's witness in the world.

I am writing this report to you with a since of mystified optimism. In the shadow of global suffering, chaos, and disarray, our church had one of its best, most generous, most creative years. The church stepped up to be the church. We let go of parts of our past that were holding us back and we stepped into an unknown future.

In the midst of it all our church also has a new renter: Bunny Chow La Jolla. This has turned into a joyful culinary adventure for La Jolla that has brought many to our patio to enjoy South African Indian cuisine. We now have an outdoor restaurant outside the church bringing friends and neighbors to our building to experience the hospitality of warm food. It is a testament to our ministry and mission that our building can continue to provide service to the community even when we are not using it.



Patrons of Bunny Chow La Jolla

As for our 2021 operating budget, your Church Council chose, at my recommendation, to approve an identical budget to 2020. After consulting with several other colleagues, it became clear that given the unexpected circumstances of 2020, the unknowns of 2021, and the continued generosity of church members, and the addition of new renters, that it would be most faithful and prudent to not react in fear. It was my feeling that passing the same budget leaves us room to pivot and the space to be flexible should the global situation change. For these same reasons we continue to exercise financial prudence and extreme caution. In addition, the staff did not take cost of living increases this year.



I invite you to “vote” virtually to approve our 2021 budget by visiting the following link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MYNVCKG>. You will also be able to vote to approve the same officers as last year. We continue to appreciate those who help the ministries of the church to continue during these socially distanced days.

I am confident that 2021 will be a year of hope and optimism. We expect to worship remotely until at least the final quarter of the year (depending on vaccine rollout), but I have no doubt that if 2020 could be a successful year of deep generosity, creativity, surprise, and delight, then 2021 will offer us yet another chance to dive further into God’s surprise, mystery, and mercy. Let’s go!

With grace,

Rev. Tim Seery

