

CRIBB<S> NOTE – MARCH 7, 2010

One of the most recurring experiences I have had since moving here in 2007 has been people walking up to me and saying, “I didn’t know there was a progressive church in San Marino.”

Well, yes, there is and it has been around for a pretty long time. In fact, it is part of a progressive religious movement that dates back at least to the founding of the United States of America. Our denominational ancestors were among the signers of the Declaration of Independence. They stood in defense of African men and women who were held in bondage aboard the Spanish slave vessel, La Amistad. Many years later, Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen directed and produced a motion picture about the ordeal in which New England Congregationalists hired former United States President John Quincy Adams to represent the captives before the United States Supreme Court. They won their case and their freedom with help from those progressive church members.

The Congregational Church is not monolithic. It does not operate based on dogma. In the best tradition of progressive thought, it does not require its members to agree on creed, theology, or faith practices. We welcome diversity and encourage questions without the assurance of complete answers.

We believe life is a journey and our quest to know more about God is a life-long exercise.

The San Marino Congregational Church voted to join an exciting and very progressive merger of four Protestant denominations in 1957, thus forming the United Church of Christ.

Can you imagine groups of German Evangelicals finding common ground with Anglo Congregationalists following World War I and World War II? At the same time, amid the racial divide that nearly defined social life in America, White folk in the North forged strong and lasting alliances with Black people in the South, as the Southern Convention of the Christian Congregational Church was welcomed to the table where the formation of the UCC took place.

We are part of a storied tradition of challenging the status quo, questioning authority, and standing on the side of justice. Sometimes we get it wrong. Always we risk putting our lives and reputation on the line if it means being in solidarity with the poor, vulnerable, and persons who suffer.

As progressive Christians, we believe Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. We are humbled by his human example of humility and reverence before God. We realize the Creator loves the whole world and exists beyond our reasonable imagination. God speaks to every person in ways that are clearly understood and through many traditions, voices and faith settings.

There are three mottos that inform our understanding in the United Church of Christ. The first, “That they may all be one,” comes from Jesus’ prayer found in John 17:21, in which he focuses on unity among the divergent members of his movement. That is who we are: a people of various backgrounds who come together with integrity and compassion for others. We step out of our boundaries to share in the spiritual journeys of people whose valid and valuable cultures, traditions and histories are quite different from us. Yet, we seek to be one; united.

The second motto, “Don’t place a period where God has put a comma: God is still speaking,” pushes us to consider the possibilities of conversations with God that resemble the prophetic instructions given to ancient faith leaders and the people of God. Even today, God’s voice can be heard in quiet moments and with the stillness of our very busy bodies. God continues to talk to us; remains concerned about human behavior; and, intervenes in human history.

The protracted struggle to recognize the Image of God in all persons leads to the third motto that reflects a progressive perspective on human dignity. “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s

journey, you are welcome here,” is a statement that invites, welcomes, and receives everybody into the Household of God. That message is not only progressive; it is extreme and extends radical hospitality to everyone, including the despicable and outcast. The “unlovable” are told, here is a place where love abounds even for them.

To have such a church in our midst is an unexpected, special gift. We are not a perfect people, but we offer ourselves as a community that is open and affirming of all people who desire to experience God. We are not spectators of life. We are encouraged to live fully, boldly, and cheerfully. Our purpose is to have “courage in the struggle for justice and peace” and for others to be surprised by the joy of love, mercy, and grace.

You are invited to become a part of this progressive faith community where we are reminded to be unafraid, unashamed, and unapologetic about who we are and what God requires of us.

-Pastor Art Cribbs