

And Then There was One – The San Diego UCC Church Partnership

By Rachel Chapman

Did you know the Board of Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ (UCC), initiated a program to form church partnerships throughout the country? If your answer is no, you are not alone. It seems this information is a forgotten secret. What was going on in the world, communities and local churches at that time to prompt such an idea of social change? Sadly, but interestingly, not one of the several people contacted at the National setting had even heard of this program so therefore, they could not provide any first-hand information. Referrals to assumed potential resources proved ineffective.

The San Diego Church Partnership was formed in 1983 at the invitation of the Rev. Richard L. McGuire, then Mission Coordinator of the UCC Board of Homeland Ministries, the Rev. Dan Romero and UCC Southern California Conference staff member, the Rev. Carol Keim. It began with two predominantly white churches, Mission Hills First Congregational and Kensington Community; Ocean View UCC, a predominantly Japanese church; Chinese Community Church and Christian Fellowship Congregational Church, a predominantly African American congregation. Although a few changes have occurred in church memberships and names, the San Diego Partnership celebrated its fortieth anniversary in March of this year. It is recognized as the only remaining church partnership under this program.

As stated, records were not available to indicate what was going on in the wider and local churches to prompt this program. As a predominantly white denomination then and now, one might assume the objective was to encourage racial and cultural diversity by connecting various churches into partnerships of 4 or 5 churches.

According to the notes from the first San Diego partnership meeting on March 8, 1983, the rationale was to provide: 1. visibility of the UCC in the community, 2. vitality of local churches, 3. local churches in mission and 4. influence in the community. The expectation/hope was the “ethnic diversities of this partnership ministry might have a national significance.” At the time, ideas for joint activities included pulpit and choir exchanges, potlucks, mission projects, Vacation Bible School, summer picnics, educational events and more. To this day, many of these activities still take place along with Martin Luther King, Jr. Day service projects and yearly participation in the San Diego PRIDE parade.

On March 15, 1986, the Southern California Conference of the UCC presented the San Diego Partnership Ministry with its third annual Urban Ministry Award. The citation read in part: “The ministry of the Gospel has been enhanced by the daring and determined commitment of the member churches to investigate the power and efficacy of shared mission and ministry. The fellowship, biblical reflection and community that you are building in the San Diego area will be critical resources for the lives, not only of the Partnership churches, but for the entire body of churches in the Southern California Conference...you have proven that the diversity of people can gather together in mutual service.”

Lou Wargo, in an undated newsletter article called “Lou’s Views”, wrote about what he labeled “partnership week” in which Chinese New Year was celebrated, the annual Partnership pulpit exchange, a potluck meal, and Ash Wednesday service all took place within 5 days. He went on to write “while other congregations in other places struggle with issues of diversity, we’ve been able to embrace it and use it to enhance and expand our work as Christians.”

Around that same time, April 5, 1986, Religion Writer for *The San Diego Tribune*, Robert Di Veroli, wrote an article called “Togetherness is reward for joint efforts”. The article stated the then five San Diego churches “launched a cooperative venture to see how many things they can do better together than separately” naming several of the previously mentioned activities. Rev. Karl Fung of the Chinese Community Church was quoted as saying, “The purpose is for churches with common interests to get together and work together.” In a different *San Diego Tribune* article which is undated, the Rev. Arthur Cribbs, then pastor of Christian Fellowship Community Church, shared: “In 1999, members of the partnership churches staged a public demonstration in downtown San Diego following hate crimes and the violent deaths of several people in Illinois and Indiana... In 2000, The Partnership sponsored a series of community meetings with San Diego Police Officers following the separate police-involved shooting deaths of a former NFL player and a mentally ill homeless man. These meetings led to a list of recommendations sent to the police department. Former San Diego Police Chief David Bejarano credited The Partnership with creating a model that was used by his department to establish a better use of force Task Force.” That article was titled “San Diego Partnership Celebrates 20 Years”.

In the previously mentioned 1986 article, the Rev. Robin Lesure, then Associate pastor of Ocean View, UCC, stated that not everyone was enthusiastic about the partnership idea. It appears the longevity of this partnership proved more people felt otherwise. The Rev. Mary Sue Brookshire, who is pastor of Pioneer Ocean View UCC and currently the longest participating pastor in The Partnership shared these words, “The Partnership fosters relationships among our members and among the pastors that make our shared ministry more vital and joyful. Together, we continue the work that drew our churches together forty years ago: “to build a more inclusive community through our shared Christian life of care and love.””

With time, there have been a few name changes, additions, subtractions and mergers of churches. Today the San Diego Partnership includes Christian Fellowship Congregational Church of San Diego, UCC, predominantly African American; Kensington Community UCC, Mission Hills UCC, The Table – La Mesa UCC, University City United Church, all predominantly white; and Pioneer Ocean View UCC, which is predominately Japanese American. A fortieth anniversary celebration is being planned for later this year. Recognition as the only remaining church partnership established through the Board of Homeland Ministries is an honor and blessing. If your church was a part of a partnership through this program, your story is invited and welcome. Every story matters.