

The Fellowship Post

Mira Vista United Church of Christ

October 2018

Claiming Our Identity as Mira Vista UCC

by Rev. Dr. Melinda V. McLain

When you get your “who am I” question right, all of your “what should I do” questions usually take care of themselves. – Fr. Richard Rohr

Richard Rohr

Understanding who we are as a community of faith and practice is essential if we want to stretch ourselves into a new model of ministry. The question of “who we are” is complicated and yet, if we want to be more effective in reaching out to others, we need to learn simple ways to describe ourselves with ease.

Some of you know that I ask this question of every potential new minister coming before the Bay Association seeking ordination. “Because you might be the only ‘face’ of our church in the world, how will you describe the United Church of Christ within the confines of an elevator ride?” I admit, most candidates - even though they know it is coming - tend to stammer and/or go off on some long tangent about UCC history and/or polity. And I too, even though I have been asking this question for a very long time, need to work on my own answer - not only for the UCC, but for Mira Vista UCC, in particular.

In the business world, this sort of conversation is described as developing a “brand” and while we may not like to think of our church’s identity as “a commodity for sale in the spiritual marketplace”, we are being evaluated that way



all the time by those who do not know anything about us, our history, our connections, and/or our commitments. And the “spiritual marketplace” we live in is filled with all kinds of misconceptions and nastiness because the “christian” brand has been completely hijacked by fundamentalists with whom we have very little in common. And while it is tempting to want to tell anyone who will listen all the ways that we are NOT like THEM, it isn’t really the best way to make new friends.

Some of you will remember that the United Church of Christ engaged in a robust and controversial (in a good way!) branding campaign back in 2004-2005 called the “God is Still Speaking,” initiative. Our friend and colleague Ron Buford, who preached at my installation service, was the architect of that campaign.

The inspiration for the campaign was also local when Ron found a postcard in a shop in Monterrey with the following story. Shortly after the death of his beloved wife Gracie Allen, the famed comedian George Burns found a note on her desk that said: “Dear George - Never place a period where God has placed a comma. Love, Gracie”. Ron instinctively knew that this quote described our UCC ethos and theology perfectly and that we believe that God is Still Speaking, And we knew we were on the correct path when televangelist and right-wing politician Pat Robertson proclaimed on his 700 club show, “never place a comma, where God has placed a period. God has spoken!”

This “God is Still Speaking,” branding was then tested with focus groups by a professional advertising agency. The ad agency was absolutely floored by the hostility the focus groups expressed about churches in general and found it very difficult to cut through all the negative experiences participants expressed in the sessions. And so, two television spots were devised to speak to all that negativity - the [“bouncer” ad](#) and then the [“ejector” ad](#). A third ad [“all the people”](#) was also aired that was less controversial.

Because “bouncer” and “ejector” were explicit in their inclusion of lgbt couples, [CBS and NBC refused to air the paid ads](#) because they felt they challenged then President George W. Bush’s stance against same-gender marriage and were thus too political. Since that brief period when the UCC made national headlines, we have fallen back into being the best group of churches that most people know nothing about.

Still, I do find that local political activists often have a positive view of our congregations. For example, when we first met folks from Planting Justice, they had already done a [community garden](#) at our sister church City of Refuge and other activists in El Sobrante have happily seen us at most marches, rallies, and justice-oriented meetings.

But we are so much more than just another set of folks who show up at big marches. We are also people on a spiritual journey together. And so, how do we describe the unique gifts that we bring as Mira Vista UCC?



With these questions in mind, I plan to spend the Sundays in October exploring some of the “wells” of inspiration and characteristics that will help us understand who we are so that we can better “give account for the hope that is in us” (1 Peter 3:15) and be able to easily welcome others to join us. This will be a bit like our series last year on Protestantism in honor of Luther’s 500th birthday. We’ll be exploring history for its’ current relevancy in our own time.

This will be spirit-filled and fun, as well as a perfect time to invite friends, family, and neighbors to visit for worship and La Mesa. And at the end of the month, when we celebrate All Saints Day, I pray that we might all have a better “elevator speech” that honors our past and present while building our future.

the GOOD table update
by Rev. Dr. Melinda V. McLain

Since the September Post, there is a lot to report about our vision to create a pay-what-you-can cafe church, ***the GOOD table: food for body, mind, and spirit.***

In the Fall of 2016, we began earnestly searching for real estate, but by May of 2018, after seriously considering a property in El Cerrito that we could afford, but was actually too small for a sustainable business after purchase, we recognized we are truly priced out of our target area in the El Cerrito/Richmond San Pablo corridor. Also, we have discovered that there very little is for sale in this area and leases are outrageously expensive. So, Mira Vista had come to the conclusion that we needed a different plan or perhaps a new location.

In August, we became aware of a property not far from our home in El Sobrante that has potential for our original vision. The property is 1.3 acres with a 4,700 sq. ft. building that was

a [former Japanese nursery](#) in a prime location that is also close to many other member's homes too. The current owners bought the property for \$815,000 about 18 months ago and had planned to build a gas station and convenience store. The community was strongly opposed to this potential development of the property and successfully mounted a campaign to prevent the owners from selling beer and cigarettes because of the site's proximity to four nearby schools. The owner's are now planning to do mixed use housing, but the community would still prefer that to be elsewhere.

We met the owners and then had a commercial contractor take a look at the property. While the building is large and attractive and the location perfect, our contractor, who has built several restaurants, estimated that renovation for a bakery/cafe and gathering space could cost as much as \$1m. We are also down to 20 active members and we recognized that we couldn't do the project without a partner.

Unbeknownst to us, the property owners were also in conversation with a wonderful organization called [Planting Justice](#) recently featured in a [NYT article](#) with the tagline: "kale not jail". The owner connected us with them and our first meeting with their co-founder Gavin Raders was a couple of weeks ago.

It was pretty much love at first sight for building a partnership between Mira Vista UCC and Planting Justice and in the past two weeks, we have signed an memorandum of understanding to explore a partnership for a joint project and we have begun working with student lawyers at Boalt Hall's New Business Law Practicum and students from Hastings College of Law to figure out the best way to proceed.

While Planting Justice was started in Oakland, they already operate a tree farm in El Sobrante about a mile away from the property we both want to purchase and could develop a retail tree operation while we develop the bakery/cafe and gathering space. By the way, Planting Justice's nursery holds the largest and most biodiverse collection of certified

organic fruit trees in North America and they already ship seedlings from their trees and other plants to 48 states. If you are in the market for great plants and trees, check out their online catalog [here](#).

There are many synergies between us. Both organizations want to create sustainable businesses to fund our non-profit mission. (They have a landscaping business and mail-order nursery already) and we are both deeply committed to environmental and economic justice. Both organizations want to honor the important legacy of Japanese nurseries in the East Bay by continuing to operate a nursery at Adachi. Our mutual commitments to racial justice are both current and historic. Our local United Church of Christ churches helped save many Japanese homes and businesses during the internment and Mira Vista is currently offering a weekly meditation group in partnership with [Sycamore UCC](#) which houses both a Japanese language congregation and an English-speaking congregation with many Japanese members.

A partnership between us is also a great example of generational cooperation. Planting Justice is run by millennials with lots of energy and vision and Mira Vista UCC is mostly baby boomers in control of legacy capital from sale



Gavin Raders and Haleh Zandi, co-founders of Planting Justice

of our church campus. Planting Justice has many, many volunteers and a very valuable brand for fundraising to develop the site. Mira Vista has completely different networks to draw upon for both expertise and fundraising. And while Planting Justice had always hoped for a cafe on the site, they hadn't done any work in imagining such a new business in detail, while Mira Vista has a plan and even a chef on board!

The beautiful Adachi property would be ideal for both organizations, but how to acquire it? Mira Vista made an offer to the owner that was countered with a price that is way too high, even with both organizations involved.

Still, it might be possible to make a successful counter offer if:

1) A detailed renovation estimate is lower because of a disciplined design process and

pro-bono professional help from architects, engineers, and contractors plus increased volunteer activity.

2) A plan for expanded fundraising for the renovation can be developed that does not adversely impact Planting Justice's or Mira Vista UCC's current funding needs. This could include new donors in local companies that provide matching funds for employee donations plus a widened search for foundation funds.

3) Community support for our project causes the current owner to become motivated to sell at a bit more favorable price point and choose a different site for their development.

We are now diligently working to make this vision into a reality and appreciate any support you might be able to lend to this exciting endeavor!



Some of the staff of Planting Justice at Stinson Beach



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2018

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 Mindfulness Circle, El Cerrito Royale, 7p	2 Mira Vista prepares lunch, GRIP Souper Center, 10a	3	4 Community Office Hours with Pastor Melinda each Thursday @Catahoula Coffee, 2-5p Interfaith Meditation @Sycamore UCC, 6p	5	6
7 12 Noon Worship & Holy Communion followed by La Mesa with Social Action Team Neighbors in Need offering Live jazz w/Amy & Hans @El Cerrito Natural Grocery, 6-8:30p	8	9 Mira Vista Council meeting, Melinda's office, 7p	10	11 Community office hours, 2-5p Interfaith Meditation @Sycamore UCC, 6p	12	13
14 12 Noon Worship followed by La Mesa	15 Mindfulness Circle, El Cerrito Royale, 7p	16	17 <i>Diane Young on Family leave October 17, 18 & 19. Office Closed.</i>	18 Community office hours, 2-5p Interfaith Meditation @Sycamore UCC, 6p	19	20
21 12 Noon Worship followed by La Mesa Live jazz w/Amy & Hans @El Cerrito Natural Grocery, 6-8:30p	22	23	24	25 Community office hours, 2-5p Interfaith Meditation @Sycamore UCC, 6p	26	27
28 12 Noon Worship followed by La Mesa	29	30	31			

Our worship life together . . .

Join us on **Sundays at 12 noon** for our celebration with music and preaching, then stay for lunch because our worship continues as we share food and friendship together at our common table, **La Mesa**. Feel free to bring food to share as you are able. We celebrate the sacrament of **Holy Communion every First Sunday**. All are welcome at our table!

Oct 7	2,000 years and Counting <i>Social Action Team meets during La Mesa</i>	Matthew 25: 37-40
Oct 14	400 Years in North America	Matthew 5:14-16
Oct 21	Gold Rush Faith in Action	Matthew 28:19-20
Oct 28	The Comma and Beyond	John 17: 20-21
Nov 3	The Great Cloud of Witnesses	Hebrews 12: 1

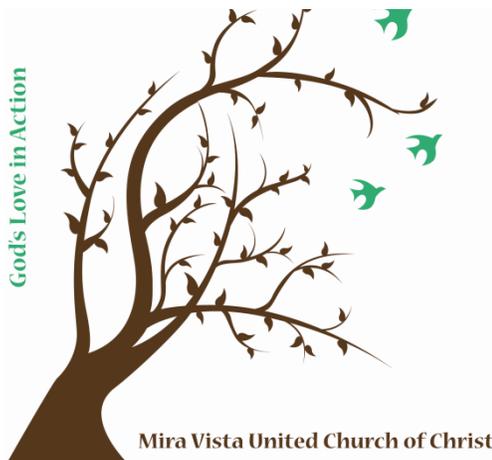


^{11th} Joann Pavlinec; ^{11th} Michael Wisely; ^{13th} Bonnie Hariton;
^{17th} Diane Young; ^{17th} Latifah Abdullah; ^{25th} Ali Edney

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