

Covenant Partner Reflection – October 22, 2017

Sarah Sydney

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be here speaking today as a member of a church to talk about what the church means to me, I probably would have laughed in disbelief. A year ago, being Oct 22, 2016, I probably would have responded that that was about as unlikely as some buffoonish reality show host becoming elected President. Well, as we all have seen, life is full of surprises.

You see, I never would have imagined that a church would become such a big part of my life. I was raised by a Jewish dad and a Protestant mom, both of them minimally religious, and I grew up believing organized religion of any form wasn't for me. As I reached adulthood and became more involved in social justice activism, I even came to associate "the church" with the Christian Right, and seeing how those folks used religion and the bible to encourage discrimination and intolerance, I would say my indifference to Christianity even grew to feelings of disdain, however unfair in hindsight that seems now.

Regarding the 2016 election. Its results were jarring to me. In the weeks following November, two emotions dominated my mental state: despair and anger. Despair for all the pain I saw around me, as countless friends, Muslim friends, undocumented friends, LGBTQ friends struggled with the fact that they did not feel safe or welcome in this country. I was also consumed by anger - at myself for not taking Trump seriously enough and being so inexcusably blind to the racism, xenophobia, and intolerance that still occupies much of America. I was also angry at our elected officials who were supporting the bigotry promoted by this administration. In February, I decided to organize a town hall with a few other activists, and we would address our grievances with Senators Tillis and Burr. Someone suggested we look at this website "Progressive Churches" for possible spaces. The first church I emailed was this place called Umstead Park United Church of Christ. Soon after sending that email, I received a call from the pastor, Doug Long. I remember being really awestruck at how laid back but also supportive he seemed. Remember, I had seen most churches especially those who lead them, as somewhat "the enemy" to the causes I hold dear. After our conversation, I emailed my fellow activists and told them, "This pastor seems really cool."

And this is how I came to UPUCC. I came to see the space and met Doug and Peg Arcari. When you meet Doug and Peg, how can you not instantly feel affection for both of them?

I walked into this sanctuary, looked around, and my eyes fell on that banner, "Be the church." It's hard to describe, but something came over me, it was a feeling I hadn't felt in a while. It was hope. Here were the very values I held most dear, but being expressed in this beautiful, serene space and by a church. Doug showed me the covenant and that too was a revelation to me. A church that welcomed all, truly all? A church that actually did seem to follow the true teachings of Jesus? A church that fought for justice? I left that day quite surprised.

We had the town hall, and I got to meet a few church members, including Gary, who as all had been, was extremely warm and extremely welcoming. It occurred to me, maybe I should check out a service?

I brought it up to my husband Jim, and as expected, his reaction was, "YOU? Want us to go to church?" I responded, "Well, it's not really a churchy church. We could just check it out."

Attending the service the following Sunday cemented my initial impression that there was something very special about Umstead Park United Church of Christ. We and our two young children were welcomed immediately.

One of the things that struck me most about the service was the time with the children. I was so impressed by the way the children were seamlessly integrated into the service, and there was a real sense that their ideas

and questions were valued, and that this community had a real interest in teaching children the values of its covenant and how to live by them.

Our family has been attending services here ever since.

So when I think about, what UPUCC means to me, the answer is: many things. I think about what this church represents in the age of Trump, and I realize how important this place of belonging and acceptance is. It is a counter to the hate expressed by many of our leaders and fellow citizens, and it also takes hold of the narrative that Christianity is an intolerant faith and turns that on its head. But also for me, personally, finding UPUCC has been a blessing. In this time where every day seems to throw us a new horror, a new reason to despair, on Sunday, I can come here and it centers me, being surrounded by this warm community. From the beautiful music David and the choir share with us to Doug's sermons that always seem to touch on just the right blend of wisdom, inspiration, faith, and social justice call to action, this place has become, for lack of a better term, a "sanctuary" for me. Before I found Umstead Park, so much of my activism had become guided by anger and hostility, and don't get me wrong, I am still angry a lot of the time. But to be angry all the time is so very draining. Having the opportunity to work with this church on advocacy, especially as a part of the sanctuary task force, has reminded me of why I got involved in activism in the first place: a compassion for and a desire to help other people. It has been an honor to work on the sanctuary task force, and I am so incredibly proud to be a part of the first congregation in the Triangle to offer sanctuary to an undocumented member of our greater community. In offering sanctuary for Eliseo and his family, this community is demonstrating that the covenant we hang in our entrance is not just words on paper to us, but principles that through our actions we live every day. This is choosing love as resistance to hatred and bigotry; this is truly faith in action.

Perhaps the most important meaning UPUCC has to me is when I think of my children. Every week, these incredible teachers and volunteers spend time teaching our children through their words and their actions how to be kind and compassionate. And my four-year-old loves coming to church! How many parents can say that? Jim and I often think about how grateful we are that our children have this great opportunity to grow up in a community of faith that walks the walk, a community that shows how faith can be used to help and not to discriminate, a community of people who understand that love is not just a noun, but a verb. Part of why I was so eager to make sanctuary happen was because I've always tried to teach my children that when we have the ability to help another person, we do it. Offering sanctuary is an example to our children of how we live out our faith and our covenant. It shows that actions matter, and that sometimes it takes courage to do the right thing. I look at the youth in this church who enthusiastically offered their space so that we could make sanctuary happen, and I can only hope that when my young children reach adolescence, they too will demonstrate the same compassion and character that these amazing youth have shown. Clearly, they have been well taught.

So for all this, my family thanks all of you. In a difficult year that has had its share of lows, one of our highlights has been finding this amazing community, Umstead Park United Church of Christ.