

SCRIPT FOR NARRATION – 2010 HOMECOMING SERVICE
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TRAVELING OUR JOURNEYS TOGETHER

Starting the Journey

Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Here at First Congregational Church we hear those words weekly and seek to live out that expansive welcome.

But where and how did that journey begin? We trace our religious heritage to the early Pilgrims who left on the Mayflower and settled in Plymouth and to those Puritans who founded Boston, that city on a hill. We pride ourselves on our history of being strong supporters of education—founding Harvard, America's first university, Yale, the third university, Dartmouth, the first university for Native Americans, Mt. Holyoke, the first college for women, Oberlin, the first coeducational college; for supporting civil rights—we count John Adams, one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence, John Quincy Adams, defender of the Africans on the slave ship Amistad, abolitionists Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, America's first woman minister, Bill Johnson, the first openly gay minister in a mainline church, Anne Holmes, the first openly lesbian minister, and statesmen Andrew Young and Barack Obama in our denominational membership.

Here in Long Beach, Jotham and Margaret Bixby, she being the daughter of a Congregational minister who operated a station on the Underground Railroad, donated the parcel of land at the corner of 3rd and Cedar in 1888 to be a church. Those first twelve members developed a faith statement that spoke of finding God in science, daily life, and history as well as in the biblical narratives. For 122 years, through wartimes and peacetimes, earthquakes, economic hardships, urban booms and suburban flight, this congregation has journeyed on a path of mutual support, and service and advocacy. Our first African American members joined in 1951, at least ten years before the nation moved in that direction. Mary Ellen Kilsby, our minister emerita, was called in 1988, one of the first women to serve a "tall steeple" church in the country. In 1992 First Congregational Church declared itself to be open to and affirming of people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities—making it the 70th church in the

country to do so. Five years ago, this local church led our denomination on the national level to pass a resolution on marriage equality, making the United Church of Christ the first mainline denomination to support these civil rights.

Our faith calls us to step out and seek to be a community offering that radical hospitality and extravagant welcome to everyone. Many of us first walked through that door because we read a website, saw an ad, heard a recommendation, came to a wedding. Some were baptized and raised in this church. Whatever brought us here, we are a collage of diverse people who have covenanted to travel together supported and held loosely as we seek to find God and follow the teachings of the human Jesus.

A Journey of Mutual Support

As travelers and seekers on a journey, we seek support from the community. First Congregational Church is a community rooted in the teachings of the biblical literature asking each of us to apply the best available scholarship and thinking to interpret the metaphorical and ambiguous writings of an ancient people two thousand or more years ago. We find truth, not in the literal, but in the lessons and interpretations of the literature.

We find support through fellowship. Our diverse church family plays together in intergenerational activities to small interest groups. And there is always food. Christmas dinners, Easter breakfasts, Homecoming lunches, church picnics, impromptu meals, First Friday games,--at these we build ties of friendship and understanding.

We find support through journeying together to seek the divine mystery-- whether it be large community gatherings with processions and banners and majestic music on significant days in the church calendar or quiet, introspective, small sacred practice with chants and incense. For many the surroundings of this magnificent building, the stained glass and polished mahogany coupled with music in its various interpretations somehow touch in them the core of spirituality and sacredness. We value our critical thinking and we don't always agree, but we trust that decisions and stands are made in the spirit and teachings of Jesus. Perhaps we are here because we believe in the possibility of us, and what we can create here together, today. As a community of seekers we ask each other to support and question and strengthen our beliefs.

We are told that Jesus gathered his followers together as a caring community. They traveled and ate together. Even as the Roman soldiers prepared to arrest and execute him, Jesus and his friends sat at a table and supported and sustained each other. And

after Jesus' death, when the community found the courage to gather again, they found strength in each other and were able to continue the ministry.

When we remember that community of mutual support and that meal, we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion.

A Journey of Service and Advocacy

Our call to the journey is centered in our spiritual understandings, but we know that the journey is not just an inward exploration of the divine. The Hebrew prophet, Micah called us "to do justice, to love kindness and walk with our God in humility". We are called to look beyond ourselves to minister to a hurting world. The expression of this advocacy and outreach is as varied and diverse as our membership. We are called to reach out, to seek justice.

From its inception, First Congregational Church has sought to reach beyond its brick walls to the community and its inhabitants. We respond with service and justice advocacy in such a time.

For such a time as this, Margaret Bixby, at the dedication of this building in 1914, called it "designed for worship, but built for service."

For such a time as this, when neighborhood children need enriching, productive activity, we support a Summer Day Camp. Begun by Dorothy and Ed Baker as a mom and pop response to hungry neighborhood children, the current program, led by Nancy Valencia, boasts over 200 participants from elementary through high school and offers employment to "graduates" of the program.

For such a time as this, when there is war throughout the world, we light candles , protest war actions, and hang paper cranes because we the church believe peace is possible.

For such a time as this, we offer safe space, computer access, health evaluations, and a meal on Sunday afternoons for up to 500 people who are hungry, homeless and impoverished.

For such a time as this, we march in the King and Pride parades to stand up to oppression. We speak out at city council meetings. We cut wheelchair spaces into our

pews and provide sign language interpretation. We open our doors and hearts to interfaith worship and endeavors.

Journeying into the Future

Since 1888, First Congregational Church has chosen the road less traveled. It is part of who we are. We are trailblazers who have experienced an extravagant welcome and seek to extend that welcome to other travelers. Undoubtedly our journey will continue to take on us unbeaten paths, facing surprising stops, and uncharted destinations. We are proud of our heritage of progressive Christianity, outreach, municipal leadership and groundbreaking radical acceptance. How will First Congregational Church respond to the pulls and pushes of the twenty-first century to extend that extravagant welcome in a manner that is relevant, true to our faith, and open to new ministries.

Margaret Bixby, one of the first Anglo women to come to southern California as part of the post Gold Rush boom, offered an extravagant welcome by donating the property and founding this church. I wonder, what did Margaret Bixby , imagine when she helped fund this building? Since the turn of the last century, this church has been known as “ a tower of faith in the heart of the city”. Could Margaret Bixby have imagined our technology centered world? What would she think of this multi-media experience? How does the church remain a “tower of faith in the heart of the city” when more and more people live out of the city? When Facebook and internet connections are the primary way people connect and support each other?

When Zella Vaughn, Dorothy Johnson, Bob Orth and others endowed the organ, did they imagine sustaining a premier music program that is highly respected in southern California? But the very music that speaks to many and is central to their experience repels many others who prefer a more contemporary or multi-cultural response. What is the future of church music and how does First Congregational Church fit in that picture?

Trailblazers Dale Whitney and Evan Nutt dreamed of providing a downtown market with locally grown produce to support healthier living styles and the Long Beach area Farmers’ Market cooperative was born. Along with what is now the South Coast Interfaith Council, our congregation helped create the Harbor Area Farmers’ Markets. Those markets allow small farmers to survive in a world dominated by large, impersonal corporations, and they allow those on limited incomes, even those using government debit cards, access to fresh, affordable food. Yet despite this effort, food deserts - where the only option within miles may be a fast food restaurant or a corner

store stocked with processed foods and liquor - remain a reality for many Long Beach residents. How will First Church respond to the growing food and health crisis?

Seniors and people with disabilities needed accessible and affordable housing—Plymouth West and Beachwood housing projects were our trailblazing responses to that need. For over 25 years we supported a welcoming and comfortable living space for low income people. How do we continue to welcome a diverse community to our neighborhood while responding their needs and balancing the costs of accommodations and accessibility.

In 1988, First Congregational Church made a trailblazing decision to retrofit the sanctuary to meet earthquake standards in order to continue to extend the welcome to the downtown community. Then in 2000, the congregation again stepped up to build the fellowship annex we now call Pilgrim Hall. John Pownell, Bob Klar, Spi Ramsey and others led this church through retrofitting, remodeling and rebuilding. Clarence Dendy volunteers countless hours doing maintenance. Our building is part of our outreach providing low or no-cost rent for counseling services, probation rehabilitation, and other community projects. But what lies ahead for a historic 1914 building with its hundred year old wiring and crumbling facades? What role will a brick and mortar building serve in a decentralized community?

Sara Schoenfelder, Melody O'Keefe, Heather Chambers, and Tracy Halter-Balin, were nurtured and raised in this church. They were baptized, confirmed, camped together, and married at a time when church school attendance was double what it is now. Children's lives are busier than ever with scouts, sports, service clubs, rising academic demands. Church school remains a safe place where children of varying abilities and talents are accepted and valued. But, thirty years from now when Clayton Heard, Scarlet Johnson, Owen Orr, and Lauren Maletesta are adults, what will that nurture and care look like for their offspring?

Our journey is peopled with the shadows and stories of past pilgrims who nurtured and responded to their faith and found First Congregational Church at the core of their practice. No doubt the church of tomorrow will look and sound differently from the church as they or we have known it. But the values of progressive Christianity, the community of caring and support and the heritage of outreach and advocacy are our hope and our legacy. It's up to us to plant the seeds of tomorrow and shepherd their growth.