

**Northern California Nevada Conference
Annual Gathering
June 6-8, 2024
Big Red Church Fresno, CA**

Submitted by Cheryl Jones

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick; ¹⁸ “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. ²⁰ The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, ²¹ the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise. Isaiah 43:16-21 NIV

It was my pleasure to serve as Skyline’s lay delegate to the NCNC 2024 Annual Gathering. I attended in person and Pastor Laurie attended virtually. We were two of the 150 in person and 10 virtual delegates and attendees participating in the conference.

The Annual Gathering theme was “Making All Things NEW”, the same theme as the National Setting.

The conference consisted of:

- New Delegate Orientation
- 1 Discernment Session to learn more about the Partnership with Tainan Presbytery and Affordable Housing, the 2 resolutions we voted on
- 2 Plenary sessions
- 3 Worship Services
- 1 Keynote Message
- State of the Conference
- 6 Workshops
- 2 Taizé Services
- Speak Outs
- Association Meetings
- 5 Meals, including the Friday night Banquet, awards and entertainment
- Vendors
- Social Time

The Agenda:

Mornings started with Taizé

Daily Worship

Opening Worship Rev. Simon Biasell-Moshrefi - Pastor First Congregational Church Fresno

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Pastor Simon welcomed us to Fresno and the Big Red Church, he is a new UCC member, he's been part of the UCC for 90 days as the Annual Gathering began.

Something new gets us riled up and then we go back to the old thing. Mainly because when we read the passage about God doing a new thing, we believe it is an order form for the new thing we think God should be doing. The new things we think God should be doing in our church.

Then we say, we tried the new thing, but it didn't happen, the old thing kept happening. Well just maybe that new thing God is doing is affordable housing, a new model for public safety, a new way to love or a new salaam for our Palestine and Israeli brothers and sisters.

New things are happening in our churches; however, we keep seeking hand me downs, hand me downs from Corporate America or technology or our cultures. God said He's doing a new thing, but we keep missing His new things. We're too busy looking at the rear-view mirror. When we look out in our churches all we see is old, the number of members we used to have, the programs we used to have and the member contributions we used to have.

Isaiah said don't focus on the old things because we're missing the new things that are happening. God's new things are different from corporate culture. God's new things are not things that we possess but things that will possess us. God's new thing is not something we consume but something that will consume us. God's new thing doesn't go out of style. God's new thing doesn't dry up; it is always fresh. The new things come in the wilderness, when we're searching and feeling lost, when things are dried up.

Could it be that when weren't in the wilderness we were focused on the wrong things – people, money, and missing God's new thing(s)? Good news! Those distractions are no longer. God is at work, He's been at work, let's go join Him.

Friday Worship Rev. LaTaunya Bynum - Regional Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Northern California-Nevada

There is something happening here, what it is ain't exactly clear, stop children what's that sound,
We've got to find a way, only love and conquer hate,
Please God, Revive us again, Hallelujah!

We are broken in so many ways but who do we show the world we are? We shouldn't get too nostalgic about the past. If there were no new things, what would we have? If God wasn't doing a new thing, what would we have, where would we be, who would we be? We can't go back to the way things were. We can remember what was but then move on to relish in what can be.

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Change happens, we can't go back. The place of hope causes unrest and impatience. Find Hope, be encouraged, be renewed, and own our part in our brokenness. Open hearts and connect with others Be inspired by youth and wisdom. O God be new to us so we can be new to self and to each other.

Saturday Worship and Communion – Rev. Dr. Davena Jones - NCNC Conference Minister
God is doing a new thing. Have you opened your hearts to what new things God is doing and calling you to do? Have you tried them? Learn to listen to God's voice through prayer and fasting.

Our conference minister has called us to join in a Conference-Wide time of fasting and prayer every Friday from Noon to 1, as we vision together what New Thing God is calling us to as the Body of Christ in this Conference. During this time, we're to set aside food, drinks, phones, technology, meetings and go to God in prayer.

When we can believe in God when things are imperfect. We can shout when things are perfect. What new thing is God calling you to? Where is God calling you to serve. When we said yes to God, we said yes to the local church, the association, the conference and to the UCC. We are called to serve together. Open your hearts and minds for us to do this new thing together.

Keynote Address – Rev. Cassey Tinnin – Pastor Loomis Basin UCC

When Rev. Casey was interviewed for the Sr. Pastor position he was asked, "How would you know it is time to shut the doors of your church", He responded, when the community is asked who you are and they don't have an answer, or you ask the community for support and they ask, who are you. If your church had a crisis, would your community come to your support? What need is being met by your church's existence?

Rev. Tinnin spoke of the retaliation their church received in response to providing a safe place for LGBTQIA+ children to meet and hang out. The proud boys showed up at the church with their threats, they showed up at Rev. Casey's home. In the beginning no other local churches stood with them. NCNC did with prayers and support, support given through our OCWM giving. Our conference minister went to worship with them. The UCC and Loomis UCC are a direct threat to Christian Nationalism. In response "Intersection" was set up, as a meeting place for religious leaders to confront religious trauma. They also created support groups for queer youth and their parents.

Whose soul has been saved by your congregation? Rev. Casey spoke of a child coming to the program that was only there because he had nowhere better place to go. One evening as the program was shutting down, the young man asked to go into the sanctuary; Rev. Casey unlocked the door and let

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him in. He went in and wept and wept and wept. When he was finished, he told Rev. Casey he didn't need to come into the sanctuary again, he just needed to know he could exist in that space. What is salvation? The wholeness of life, building a community where everyone can be seen.

He also spoke of a child committing suicide, Rev. Casey was called by a school administrator in the middle of the night alerting him of the incident and that he may be needed at the school the next day. The administrator was right, the children didn't want to talk to police counselors, they would only talk to Rev. Casey.

The minister at one of the larger churches announced the there was a Jezebel spirit At Loomis UCC, and something had to be done about it. A man came to their service to do just that. Th man said he came there because he'd heard Loomis UCC was a place of conflict, but he left knowing it was a place of peace,

God gives us tasks and then he puts us to the test, walk in boldness. We can't go back. We can only go forward, "Therefore since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart (2 Corinthians 4:1)". Don't lose heart, don't give up. The road is long, the journey is long, don't give up because our children are being mortified.

God is calling us to a new thing. He's calling us to risk something. We are God's people called to a new thing for God's people.

When your community is asked who your church is, what will they say?

Workshops:

There were 6 workshops to choose from, they were:

1. Jail Ministry – Revs. Evelyn Vigil & Beverly Brook
2. Our Whole Lives – Sexuality Education – Revs. Todd Atkins-Whitley and Lauren Jewett
3. The Enneagram – Rev. Cassey Tinnin
4. UCC Churches and Middle East Peace: How Can We Be Peacemakers – Rev. Jim Mitulski
5. Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sexual Orientation – Rev. Michael Ellard
6. Community Organizing as Evangelism – Rev. Cassey Tinnin

I attended Our Whole Lives – Sexuality Education and Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sexual Orientation

Our Whole Lives is a Lifestyle Sexuality program (K1 – Senior Adult) that helps participants make informed and responsible decisions about their relationships, health and behavior in the context of their

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faith. It equips participants with correct age-appropriate information in six subject areas **human** development, relationships, personal skills, sexual behavior, sexual health and society and culture. It provides not only facts about anatomy and human development but also helps participants to clarify their values, build interpersonal skills and understand the social emotional and spiritual aspects of sexuality.

Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sexual Orientation Language changes over time. What was acceptable may over time become offensive. Today we have Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Gender Preference and Affectional Expression. This is why pronouns are helpful

Resolutions and Volunteer Slate

Resolutions and the slate of volunteers for committees and conference council were discussed in the Discernment and Plenary Sessions. The resolutions were:

1. Partnership with Tainan Presbytery – The proposed resolution is to renew the Global and Ecumenical Partnership with the Tainan Presbytery is an exciting opportunity that will open our eyes to God's vision that is making all things new. The resolution calls for partnerships in Christ's service to ministries of grace and compassion in the world's context. This resolution also calls for Conference-wide and local church support and participation.
2. Position Statement on Affordable Housing Measures on the California Ballot in November 2024 - be it resolved that the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ endorses these upcoming ballot measures for affordable housing funding and encourages all members and friends to prayerfully consider supporting these measures this fall in an effort to respond to God's call to meet the needs of all of our neighbors for dignified, safe shelter so that all God's people can thrive.

Both resolutions passed unanimously.

Election of Conference Board and Committee Volunteers

The slate of officers presented by the NCNC Board was unanimously approved. Chosen from Skyline Community UCC were:

- Walter Jones – Committee on Ministry Section A – (Authorization for Ministry; Com-A)
This Section provides support and oversight for Members in Discernment, as well as candidates for Ordained Ministerial Partnership Standing or Dual Standing, and applicants for Privilege of Call.
 - Rev. Laurie Manning – Committee on Ministry Section D – (Local Churches Support; COM-D)
This Section, currently dormant, provides supportive and consultative resourcing for affiliated member churches to strengthen and equip their local ministry.
- Cheryl Jones – 35th and 36th General Synods NCNC Delegate

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Upcoming Dates

- Fridays Noon – 1 Conference-wide Fasting and prayer through October 26, 2024+
- Fall NCNC Meeting - October 26, 2024 - Online only via Zoom
- 2025 Annual Gathering – June 14, 2025 – One Day – Online Only via Zoom
- 35th General Synod – July 11 – 15, 2025 Kansas City, MO



First Congregational Church of Fresno
The Big Red Church