

## **“The State of the Church”**

2 Corinthians 4:1, 5-10, 16-5:1 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 13, 2021  
Congregational Meeting Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might proclaim you as sovereign and live in the ways of your Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Every year, on the Sunday when we hold our Congregational Meeting, I endeavor to sum up for you where we are as a congregation in this annual sermon called “The State of the Church”. As you can imagine, this is a particular challenge during a pandemic, though it feels much less daunting today than it did a year ago. I will share with you a few of the highlights and challenges, but more than anything, I wanted to use these verses from Second Corinthians because I want us to celebrate that we have not lost heart. What we have been through felt like a bit more than a “slight momentary affliction,” as Paul might try to call it, but we have held on.

The “clay jar” that is Vista La Mesa Christian church has provided much opportunity to notice that “this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Thanks be to God for bringing us through! We have not just survived; we have remained faithful as church through these long months of pandemic living. Let me remind you of some of the highlights.

We have maintained our connections. From small groups that adapted to Zoom or were born there to birthday parades with balloons and frozen yogurt and a

constant card ministry, we found ways to stay present in one another's lives. The prayer life of our congregation blossomed during this time, as sharing our concerns and our thanksgivings became a lifeline. We joined in spirit to carry each other through cancer, covid, and strokes, the loss of loved ones, and more. We even welcomed some new members earlier this year!

In this most challenging year, we managed to be more financially stable than we have been in a while. And while supporting our congregation is a vital foundation, we didn't just support ourselves. In January, we raised over \$3000 to support a pandemic-adapted version of Interfaith Shelter. In February, we exceeded our \$500 fundraising goal for Week of Compassion by more than \$700! You have given faithfully to our Welcome Saturday fund and the Pastor's Discretionary Fund, which have both helped out neighbors and friends in need in significant ways over the past 15 months. Recently, we've even revived our monthly Food Drive. Another highlight of our service to our community came in October when our re-imagined Trunk-or-Treat had cars lined up all the way down to Jack-in-the-Box for an hour or so to drive through our Halloween Circus Showcase!

We dug deeper into our faith as we studied scripture and wrestled with vital issues of our day, such as systemic racism and Christian nationalism. We worked our way through two significant sermon series, exploring our relationships with "Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, [and] Enemy" in the fall and focusing on how to ENDURE in Lent. And perhaps most long-lasting, we spent another year nurturing Tesa in her

growth as a minister. We have been church! It has not been easy, but we have not lost heart.

As I wrote in my devotional message this past Friday, things are about to shift. If we think of our congregation as a body, as the Body of Christ, it's as if we've been trapped in a body cast for many, many months, and we're about to be cut free. We haven't been able to connect in the ways we were used to and to do so now will require some stretching. Can we still touch our toes? We will discover which muscles have atrophied. We may be stiff and weak when it comes to working together as a body again. We will need to go slow and be gentle, with one another and with ourselves. We must remember that none of us is at our best. We're out of practice at hanging out and going through the movements of worship and fellowship together. We may have gotten a little too used to solitude, so "people-ing" as the introvert crowd puts it may be extra tiring at first.

The jar may seem a little more clay and a little less filled with extraordinary power. But I implore you to watch for how God is at work in our midst over the next couple of months. This year has made what Paul wrote all the more clear: "it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry." God isn't going to give up on us now!

That poetic list of circumstances Paul wrote feels pretty fitting. We've definitely been afflicted and perplexed. I will not claim that we've been persecuted, because it's simply not true, no matter how many Supreme Court cases tried to claim

that somehow germs don't spread the same way in houses of worship as they do in the rest of the world. But what are some other descriptions we could name? We've been scattered, but not divided; made weary but not apathetic. Some among us were infected, but not hospitalized. With regard to technology, we were challenged, but not deterred. And probably all of us have been exhausted, but let us pray not hopeless.

This may not have been a "slight momentary affliction" – I think even Paul would give us some credit for living through one of the most challenging seasons of our lives – but it has definitely been an opportunity to realize just how important the presence of God is to our church life. Could we have done any of this without the power of the Holy Spirit within us? The sheer intensity of the creativity and flexibility this year has required of us points us toward that "extraordinary power" that does not come from us, but belongs to God. What is the state of the church? We have not lost heart. We have been church. And we have managed that by the power and mercy of God in our midst. Hallelujah and Amen!