


| THINK |

BUILDING A COVENANT COMMUNITY

The background of the entire page is a photograph of several business professionals in a meeting. They are silhouetted against a bright, warm sunset or sunrise, with the light creating a gradient from yellow to orange to red. The people are standing and appear to be in conversation, with some gesturing. The overall mood is professional and collaborative.

The Sierra Pacific Mission Center covenant focuses on compassionate ministry and courageous action. In this story you will find words from the covenant woven throughout. It has been, and continues to be, a guide to the community amidst uncertainty, change, and wild transformation.



By Shandra Newcom
Sierra Pacific USA Mission Center President

With Laura Bolton, Ila June Brunner,
Marla Faszholtz, Paul Harding, Ron Harmon,
Kris Judd, Gail Ronneberg, Dave Seagraves,
Ruth Seagraves, Elaine Turner, and Linda Walsh

We are an intentional, openhearted, Christ-centered covenant community that invites people into living authentic and loving lives of justice, peace, joy, love, and hope.

Everything changed on March 13, 2020.

As the world was shutting down because of the COVID-19 pandemic and congregational buildings were closing in an effort to keep folks safe and healthy, something else was stirring within us—the members and friends of the Sierra Pacific USA Mission Center.

God was calling us to explore who we were becoming, even amid uncertainty and a great deal of fear. God didn't stop God's work in the world. God was moving within, among, and ahead of us. Even though we knew at that time that big changes were coming, we had no idea how the next sixteen months would transform us as a community; no idea that our response to Christ's call to justice and peace would take us on a covenant journey that has become more and more embedded in our identity as God's beloveds.

We are called to contribute to God's dream of shalom for all of creation.

Like most of you, it was difficult to make the shift from the usual and comforting congregational path of meeting in person in our buildings once a week for fellowship and worship. The decision to close buildings due to COVID-19 was painful, but we began to offer a variety of online experiences, always inviting the entire mission center to participate in what was becoming an unfolding community.

The most important decision probably was to hold mission center-wide worship each Sunday morning. Pastors were asked to consider not holding separate Sunday-morning online worships so that we could consistently gather as a broader community. We began meeting online each Sunday and grew closer as followers of Christ.

Before we knew it, we were creating an emerging online congregation.

I love being part of a mission center-wide Sunday congregation, and that sense of community has grown. For me, there was a letting go phase, a learning a new way and troubleshooting phase, and finally a settling in to the "barefoot church" rhythm.

—Ruth Seagraves

We recognize that God is always present within, among, and ahead of us.

A covenant is a relationship of commitment between God and God's people.

During the summer of 2020 and in response to a broadening understanding of systemic injustice, mission center staff, pastors, and others began to explore what it might look like to become a community planted deep in justice and growing in peace. Could we covenant with one another to do the work of Jesus and do it while dedicating ourselves to love for each other and the world?

In the fall, I felt the nudge of the Spirit as mission center president to take a three-day discernment sabbatical as I explored this question: How is the Sierra Pacific Mission Center being called to walk with Christ and one another on a journey of awakening, risking, and blessing—even during this challenging time? At the same time, I asked pastors, staff, and the SPMC online congregation as a whole to be prayerful and consider the question as well.

—Shandra Newcom, mission center president

What emerged was the beginning of some thoughts around what it means to be a community with a covenant. Using the Enduring Principles as a foundation, threads of ideas were created that—after prayerful consideration—turned into our covenant. (Read the full covenant at www.cofchrist-spmc.org/our-covenant).

It has been important to us to engage with the words of the covenant over the past year. We sing them, read them, and use them in worship. All ministries being offered in the mission center flow from the covenant. We declare ourselves to be Christ-centered community, and we have dedicated ourselves to being that community, not for just ourselves, but for the whole of creation.

This experience of covenant has been broadening, deepening, enriching. Our journey has been inspiring and hopeful. We love the breadth and depth of the covenant language; it really gives "arms and legs" to the Enduring Principles.

—Marla Faszholtz and Ila June Brunner

While this covenant is expressed many ways, it always supports the mission, message, and love of

Jesus Christ. This means we value social justice in a world hungry for transformative peace.

One of the most vital expressions of community we have created is a weekly pastor call. At first pastors were invited to meet each week as a way of sharing announcements and to stay connected during the chaos at the beginning of the pandemic.

But something else became primary as many of our pastors continued each week to Zoom as a team. We began to see clearly that our pastor calls were becoming support during times of grief or expressions of joy and laughter as we shared during times of openness and vulnerability. In many ways, covenant was birthed in this group, and dedication to God's plan keeps us meeting every week as we dream of what radical love can do for our community of faith.

Our pastor team has been nurturing, and I've experienced a deepening of relationships and of my spiritual journey.

—Elaine Turner

We listen deeply to one another, honoring the sacredness of each life story.

Two people have specifically served as support through this journey. Apostle Ron Harmon gives encouragement and shows up for us as we move for God. He has made it a point to meet regularly with me and to bring covenant-based ministry to our Sunday morning worships. Ron brings a heart for justice and always challenges us to awaken to God, risk something new, and become a blessing.

What I see emerging is a tangible expression of President Veazey's challenge to "birth, nurture, and multiply spiritually formed communities of compassionate ministry and action." I see covenant communities forming around various aspects of Christ's transformative mission. I see new opportunities for invitation where spiritual explorers can encounter meaning beyond the self and connection with others who want to be co-creators of a more just and peaceful world.

—Ron Harmon, apostle

At the beginning of our experimentation as covenant community, I invited evangelist Kris Judd

to walk with us as spiritual companion. Kris and I began to meet every week, and my creativity was sparked as we talked about what was possible with SPMC. She comes to our pastor meetings, she comes to worship, and she loves our people.

As an evangelist and spiritual companion, I was invited to walk with Shandra and the members of this mission center on their journey in becoming covenant community. I have been given the gifts of worship and conversations that are spirit-full, friendship and authentic concern for my well-being, as well as a place of safety and inclusion. I believe these qualities stem not only from the good people themselves but the nature of the covenant under which they are choosing to live together.

Speaking of, praying with, remembering, and affirming our common values and purpose as we come together each time centers us in how we will be with one another and what we can expect during our time together. The written document outlining our reason for existence and way of being offers a common grounding as well as accountability. All are welcomed and invited to be a part of this sacred community; yet there is also the acknowledgment of purpose, priorities, and responsibilities to the community.

The choice to belong is made by those invited, but there are grace-filled expectations underlying the choice. We are responsible to and for one another's wellbeing and focused on the mission of Christ in our own contexts and communities. While we may have different political, cultural and theological perspectives, the covenant provides a common path and focus, allowing there to be diversity even while we are experiencing a sense of unity. After such a time of disagreement and disunity in our culture, this community is a breath of fresh air and has been a balm to my soul.

—Kris Judd

We especially set as a priority our children and youth, and we value intergenerational ministry.

Sometimes I joke around that my job as youth minister is really that of an event planner. That joke was put to the test during the pandemic when my job was no longer about events and all about keeping our youth connected and together during a time when they couldn't be. This task was monumental, and I wasn't sure how we were going to manage it. We started exploring covenant community when we needed it most, and it created a

way for our community to stick together with a common mission and ideology. The covenant itself wasn't designed specifically for kids, but when a whole community embraces something, it makes its way into every part of that community. The covenant created a way forward for our whole community and kept our youth engaged and active. I think we as a mission center would look and feel a lot different if we had to weather COVID-19 without our covenant community.

—Laura Bolton, youth minister

We participate in creating a space of radical hospitality and belonging, inviting all to experience the grace of God in community.

Of course, there are always challenges that come with change. An online community can never replace in-person relationships. We had to make difficult decisions to have online youth camps and family reunions for two summers. For some people, online worships and activities just didn't provide the experiences with the faith community they were looking for, and they self-selected out of our ministry offerings.

We were also challenged by folks who asked questions about the covenant itself and tried to integrate it into their faith journey. These were good "growing pain" questions as they helped focus the conversation and changed some of the language we were using.

We work to stay vulnerable with one another, to be fully present, to stay curious, and remain open to transformation through God's call to be a sacred community.

There were surprises all along our way as we reimagined what it meant to be community. People joined our Sunday ministries as well as experiences we offered throughout the week. Suddenly people throughout the mission center and around the world who had never met were telling one another about their lives—about joys and grief, about family and faith. We were getting to know one another in



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a way we never could have before the pandemic.

Amid sorrow, there was also joy.

As we continued to gather online, many chose to be a part of a deepening spiritual journey beyond our Sunday offerings. Some connected in small groups to consider the movement of the Spirit. Many joined as we offered online spaces for grief and memory sharing, explorations of images of God, candlelight vigils before important events in our country, and weekly devotion groups. All of these turned our hearts toward the One who created us to be together.

We made the choice to have a common thread in our Sunday online events through monthly themes and scriptures. Some of our themes have been Life-Light, Spiritually Forming, and Belonging. Our next theme is Adventure—a word that describes our journey into what’s next. These themes help us deepen into God’s continuing thread of creativity and love.

Being able to connect in the mission center for Sunday school and other youth activities has been wonderful. It has helped our daughter connect to the church in a way that has been meaningful to her, and it is something she looks forward to. She also enjoys getting to see adults in our services that she wouldn’t normally see on a regular basis. She enjoys sharing with them things that are important to her. Their interest in what she has to say means a lot to her, and to us.

—Paul Harding, mission center financial officer

We recognize that each person is on a spiritual journey, and we commit to supporting one another with a call to be grounded in justice and focused on being a prophetic people.

As we stop and reflect on the past sixteen months there is so much we have learned as a community. First, we learned that connection and relationship are possible on Zoom. We learned to be flexible. Always grounded in the message of Christ, we continually sought to reflect on what we were learning as we went along. Our actions as a community emerged from those reflections.

We also learned that, as a community,

responding to the needs we saw before us in the world is very important. Throughout the pandemic there were many times the brokenness of the world broke our hearts; we stopped as a community and were present with what we saw before us. This flexibility allowed us to feel like we were a part of the broader story and gave us space to experience God’s call and our response as a community.

This journey has been life-giving and nourishing. We think our journey has been one of personal awakening and also increased community awareness to the reality of others’ lives. Our hope is that we continue on this path that creates our “now” with intentionality and discernment and that is open to what comes next—letting it unfold and emerge. We have hope in our ability to increase our individual and collective awakening through education, sharing experiences, by deepening relationships, by becoming more comfortable with vulnerability, by trusting more fully in the good Spirit, by being more open to change.

—Linda Walsh and Dave Seagraves

We believe Christ’s mission is our mission. Jesus came to give good news to the poor, to release the captive, to give sight to the blind — to set us free. We covenant with one another to do this same work.

Looking forward to what is emerging for us, we have seen that we are called to radical missional realignment. We continue to ask the essential questions, and we are excited to experiment with new ways of being Sierra Pacific Covenant Community.

For our congregations, we will continue the weekly pastor call. There will be support for pastors and congregations with encouragement for them to stay connected to the Covenant Community congregation. The relationships that have been built are primary. Grounded in Christ’s invitation to compassionate ministry, our congregations will play a vital role in our large picture ministry.

As we return to in-person worship and community-building experiences, there will be a variety of offerings— many of them are new and emerge from our covenant. Each of these

experiences will have an online component. We have worked hard to make sure all feel welcome and like they belong. A continuing focus on the importance of different types of connecting will hopefully maintain relationships and provide opportunity for greater participation.

As mission center president, my job will be changing significantly. The ways I connect with congregations and folks in the mission center will shift. For example, I will maintain my deep connection to our online Sunday morning ministries, which means I won't be traveling to visit congregations every Sunday. I will be moving to a model that brings people together in new ways.

—Shandra Newcom

One of our new ministries will be day events. These day experiences will focus on learning how to do community ministry as a mission center. This fall, we will share an experience that will focus on hunger issues in the world. Through Bread For the World, we will participate in letter-writing campaigns to our members of Congress. While these day events will be created with the covenant in mind, they will be expansive to include response to our call to be “courageous and visionary.” Each day will include an honest and practical conversation about how we can be co-creators with God to bring about change to our world through action.

There are a number of other ministries we will continue moving forward. Our anti-racism reading circle will meet again in the fall. We will be working with Harmony to become a welcoming and affirming mission center. Our communities will continue to hear the call to be not only “covenant community” but also “prophetic people.”

Our intention is to continue our work with the covenant. It is not a static document but, rather, words that need to create space for the Spirit to breathe. During the fall, we will host conversations

online about how to take the current words and respond to how we feel we are being called as community. This likely will mean that some of the covenant language will change.

We will also be creating a children and youth version of the covenant so our kids can better understand our call to deepen our spiritual journey and act for justice.

Prior to the pandemic, we were—many of us—just “playing church.” Refocusing our energies on finding ways to connect has changed my perspective on what church can and should be.

—Gail Ronneberg

What does it mean to you to be a part of an authentic and loving Christ-centered community? Our answer to that has been grounded in love, action, and Christ's call. This has been quite an adventure. We are excited to see what happens next!



OUR MISSION

Experience Congregations in Mission

We are called to become congregations that are the true and living expressions of Jesus Christ, woven together by the Spirit, and sent into the world as evangelistic witnesses, compassionate ministers, and justice and peacemakers.