The good news, lived among us

The missions and ministries of Marian Barr Conning
Contents

Overview ................................................................................................................................. 3
The good news, lived among us .............................................................................................. 4
A love unconditional .................................................................................................................. 5
A faith beyond reason ............................................................................................................. 7
Disruption granted ................................................................................................................... 8
Intolerance-Free Zone ............................................................................................................. 9
One Body: Intercommunal reconciliation ............................................................................... 11
Faith in community ................................................................................................................ 13
Only love builds: Callings to Cuba ....................................................................................... 14
Personal resistance plan ......................................................................................................... 17
Environmental stewardship .................................................................................................... 19
Humility and simple living .................................................................................................... 20
Irreverend Conning ................................................................................................................ 21
Personal struggles .................................................................................................................. 21
Here I am, send me ................................................................................................................. 22
   A new vision for SBCC ......................................................................................................... 23
   No backward looks ............................................................................................................. 23
   Launching the Amistad ....................................................................................................... 24
   A first-century church for the twenty-first century .......................................................... 27
   Mission accomplished ....................................................................................................... 29
Infirmity and mortality ........................................................................................................... 30
Love never ends ...................................................................................................................... 33
Overview

Marian Barr Conning died of heart failure on May 29th, 2018 while resting at her home in Pleasanton, California. She was 76.

Born in wartime Washington, DC, Marian moved to Berkeley with her parents after her father concluded his military service. There she doted on three younger brothers; worshipped at the First Congregational Church (FCCB), teaching Sunday school from the age of 13; attended public schools, serving as Chair of the Berkeley High School Senior Friends in her final year; earned a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of California in 1964; wed fellow Cal student Keith Robert Conning; and raised their three children.

As a member of FCCB, Marian served as the Director of Christian Education, led outreach programs for community and refugee children, and ministered to the homeless and the mentally ill. In 1981 the church honored Marian

for teaching us, by word-and deed,

to have faith in a God of love and justice,

and for keeping always before us a commitment to all of God’s people, here and everywhere.

Heeding an insistent vocation to Christian lay ministry and service, Marian earned a Master’s of Divinity from the Pacific School of Religion in 1982. This calling then led her to the South Berkeley Community Church, where she remained a member until 1999. In this multiethnic and socioeconomically disadvantaged congregation, Marian found a natural base for her ministry of intercommunal reconciliation and Christian nurture. She started programs for neighborhood youth, supported a feeding ministry for the homeless, went on pastoral calls to the sick and homebound, preached when the congregation could not afford to pay a pastor, and wore still more hats as deacon, trustee, and treasurer. She maintained the congregation’s monthly newsletter and prepared its weekly liturgy and Sunday bulletins. She was known to go door-to-door in the community to bring the children to church. She became a godmother and mentor to several of those children, whom she regarded as gifts of grace in her life. She later wrote that when she was in the midst of a severe heart attack in 1996, it was the vulnerability of her grand-godson Christopher that helped her overcome the temptation to slip away.

Marian practiced a Christian commitment to simple living that enabled her to focus on generosity and hospitality. Taking early retirement, she and Keith moved to Vacaville in 1999 to start what she called “a first-century house church for the twenty-first century.” As Marian put it, she was attempting to “follow God’s calling to gather a new prayer-believing, justice-seeking, diverse, affirming, hope-filled and Christ-centered worshipping community.” As pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ, she opened their home as a sanctuary, took no salary, and led a small and diverse congregation in prayer, discussion, and mission. In 2007 Amistad was honored with the UCC’s William Sloane Coffin Local Church Award, nationally recognizing the congregation’s efforts for social and environmental justice at both the local and global level.

It was Marian’s destiny to carry out an inspiring, life-permeating personal ministry as a Christian lay leader, community activist, and boundary-defying peacemaker. The extraordinary grace her life bestowed upon us compels us to reflect on how this life was lived, and seek to articulate some of the wisdom that guided it.
Among the items Marian left behind was found a handwritten note: “I feel like I am living in the gospels”. For her, the evangel was not a story from the past, but the truth of her everyday experience. If such stories did not speak to this very moment, they were of little interest to her. Her insistent focus on the now could be seen in the always contemporary themes of her sermons, which had titles like “Baby on Board” (1986), “Flood #3: Telecommunications” (1995), and “Open Source Ministry” (2009). In her kitchen, she hung a cherished illustration depicting a downtrodden young couple seeking shelter outside a seedy-looking
liquor store—challenging us to recognize a Mary and Joseph in our modern-day midst. Below their cryptically haloed figures grows a small green shoot in the crack of a littered sidewalk. Graffitied on an old pay phone are the words “Zeke 34 15-16”—code for Ezekiel chapter 34, verses 15-16:

I will seek the lost
And I will bring back the strayed
And I will bind up the injured
And I will strengthen the weak.

A love unconditional

In Marian’s pious heart, the Christian teachings of love, humility, and faith found fertile soil. In her selfless spirit, the love of God flowered, and multiplied a thousandfold.

Marian loved us as we are, without stopping first to judge our worth or assess our accomplishments. God conferred on her the charism of seeing something in each of us. Many are those who have testified that she had faith in them when others did not.

Marian found worth and depth and mystery in those around her. In their search for meaning, she perceived the nature of ultimate reality. She believed the face of God could be found in every thing and every person we encounter: friend or foe, gay or straight, Clinton supporter or Trump supporter. Gathering us in worship at supper, she reminded us that “we look the Risen Christ in the eye, right across the table”. From this perspective, we may understand why she was so vitally interested in each individual she encountered:

Marian and I met when I was temping at World Institute on Disability back in 1996. One task I was assigned was to automate the mailing list. Although I was successful, Marian was disappointed: she was concerned that now that it was automated, she wouldn’t be reminded to call each person to mind as the envelope was addressed. That is how I remember her.
Seeing in each person a reflection of the infinite source, Marian attended to the afflicted, blessed the burdened, and outstretched a hand to the outcast. From 1979 to 1984 she served as a counselor and chaplain intern at the Napa State Psychiatric Hospital and at the Creative Living Center, a socialization center for persons released from mental hospitals. In the mid 1980’s she served in North Richmond as a counselor to persons trapped in patterns of substance abuse. And when a troubled South Berkeley youth she had mentored was incarcerated, she refused to give up on him. The two exchanged scores of letters. Marian kept all his letters from prison in a special box, including many elaborately illustrated birthday cards like this one:

Words cannot explain what a special day March 8 is to me. If not for your birth, life would have been very difficult for me.

Where does one begin. You and I started in a Berkeley neighborhood. You’ve unconditionally supported me on my path through life. You were there during my chaotic childhood, responsible for many of my smiles and good memories. When my future made a unfortunate turn for the worse, you were there even more so. Again as a shoulder to cry on and as my number one supporter. Very special you are.

I’d consider my personal goals unachievable thus far without your support. When I felt like throwing in the towel, you kept a letter in my hand reminding me how special I am. Very special you are.

Life is long. Halfway down the path, I can see the finish line. I believe I can make it. That wouldn’t be possible if you and your beautiful shining spirit hadn’t illuminated the beginning of the path. Very special you are.

Ten years later, I’m smarter, stronger, and a better person, I’ve defied the odds of my situation. That wouldn’t have been possible without you. Very special you are.

Marian saw the sheltering of needy persons and outsiders as a core commitment of Christian discipleship. When Vietnamese refugees were being resettled in the 1970’s, she organized an outreach program. Leading by example, she sheltered two families in her home over several years. Later she gave long-term shelter to one of the participants of the Creative Living Center. He often referred to Marian as a ‘saint’ and later wrote that his years under her care were the best of his life. In South Berkeley, Marian supported the SBCC Hunger Project, and in Vacaville she volunteered at the food pantry of St. Paul’s Methodist. In both cities, Marian served on the Steering Committee for the CROP Walk to feed the undernourished.

At meal time, Marian made a sacrament of thanksgiving for the labor of those who bring food to our table. A few weeks prior to her death, she reminded us on her Facebook page that it was
May Day – a day to be mindful of the workers of the world who make our shoes and our underwear, who prepare and serve our meals in restaurants and rest homes, who weed our strawberries and prune our grape vines, who purify our drinking water and treat our sewage. And a day to unite in our determination that workers be fairly paid and rightly treated.

A faith beyond reason

The limits of science have always been the source of bitter disappointment when people expected something from science that it was not able to provide. Take the following examples:

- a man without faith seeking to find in science a substitute for faith on which to build his life;
- a man unsatisfied by philosophy seeking an all-embracing universal truth in science;
- a spiritually shallow person growing aware of his own futility in the course of engaging in the endless reflections imposed by science.

– Karl Jaspers

The Christian faith of Marian’s adult years was not that of her childhood. As a young adult in a progressive congregation, she came to think of God not as Omits (“Old man in the sky”) but as the One of the entire universe. I remember watching a TV show one evening about the stone-age Tasaday people on Mindanao. I was nursing a baby at my breast and the TV showed a stone-age woman, naked except for a loincloth, squatting by a stream and nursing a baby at her breast. In that moment I knew that we are all One. I hope I never forget that.

An enlightened faith, Marian knew, could not be based on simple affirmation, but only on the meaning that emerges from the testing fires of doubt. For her, these fires leapt most fiercely from the withering postmodern feminist critique, the coolly detached empiricism of the social sciences, and the comprehensive world explanation offered by Marxism.

Over the years there have been in my mind, motives, and bookshelves three serious alternatives to Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life: those three clamoring alternatives have been Marxism, psychology and—a distant third—feminism.

Ultimately these alternative worldviews led Marian to reappropriate her faith tradition at a deeper level of truth, one capable of integrating the lessons of adolescent disillusion. This more radical and prophetic faith was profoundly influenced by the liberation theology and feminist biblical scholarship she encountered as a graduate student at the Pacific School of Religion:

In 1980, while a student at Pacific School of Religion, I was privileged to take a summer course from Sergio Arce and his wife Dora Valentin of the Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba. The course was called “The Theology of Revolution” and centered around how Christians remaining in Cuba after the Triumph of the Revolution (or Castro takeover, depending on you perspective!) had struggled with what it meant to be church, to be faithful, in a revolutionary context. It was a major turning point in my life, and Arce (as we all called him) and Dora became dear friends and my mentors in faith.

The following year I went with others from PSR, including Professor Wayne Rood, to spend a month studying at the seminary in Matanzas—again, this was a profoundly wonderful, life-changing experience for me. (One way it changed my life was to lead me away from the church where I’d grown up, and eventually to South Berkeley Community Church!)

Through a critical exploration of religion and society, Marian discovered an understanding of God that embraces but transcends rational and scientific understanding—an ultimate, morally evaluative
perspective that answers higher-order questions like “Why should we be scientific in the first place?” Far from replacing reason, such faith is what ultimately animates and underpins rational inquiry. Only from this ultimate perspective, Marian found, can we answer questions about the meaningfulness of intellectual endeavor. In this deepened, reason-transcending faith, she came to see new ways in which the Christian message could be the moral foundation for transforming human experience—not at odds with feminism, social science, or Marxism, but providing a reflective medium that lies beyond their circumscribed, rational spheres.

From this point onward, a deepened and more capacious Christian vision would guide Marian’s spiritual journey. She would find that “centering” her spirituality in Christ’s radical world critique helped her remain rooted in an ultimate perspective, rather than sliding into a shallow and uncritical spiritual eclecticism:

“Christ-centered”—this is where the rub is! People I encounter—churched and unchurched, clergy and lay alike—find themselves very nervous about believing in, following, making a commitment to or even speaking the name of Jesus Christ. The credibility debate rages in their minds. They’ve been scared off by the Cross, turned off by fundamentalists, impressed with the wisdom of the Buddha, Gaia, Higher Power or Source, embarrassed by our church history and by their own weak grasp of scripture, or they feel that declaring allegiance to any particular guru or method or teacher is contrary to the spirit of diversity, tolerance and interfaith dialogue… My own feeling is that we best approach the interfaith dialogue from the deep places of our own Christian faith—meeting there others coming from their own deep places of faith—rather than from a common ground of superficial syncretism.

**Disruption granted**

Sometime not long before her death, Marian shared this prayer on her Facebook page:

> Lord make me a channel of your disturbance.
> Where there is apathy, let me provoke,
> Where there is silence, may I be a voice.
> Where there is too much comfort, and too little action, Grant disruption.
> Where there are doors closed and hearts locked, Grant me the willingness to listen.
> When laws dictate and pain is overlooked . . .
> When tradition speaks louder than need . . .
> Disturb us, O Lord, Teach us to be radical.
> Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than to talk about it;
> To be with as well as for the poor;
> To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;
> To touch the passion of Jesus in the Pain of those we meet;
> To accept responsibility to be church.
> Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance.

- Gina Kohlhelpp

Marian interpreted the Judeo-Christian message of salvation to imply a radical criticism of any existing order. Just as the cross’s vertical piece intersects at a right angle with its horizontal piece, so the Spirit is orthogonal to the given world, external and invisible to it, reflecting morally upon it from a separate dimension that cannot be expressed in the given world’s terms.

Marian experienced the evangel as a morally redemptive message tending to disrupt the prevailing patterns of our contemporary culture:
We are a post-Christendom church, offering not a validation of the surrounding cultural ethos but a radical alternative to an individualist and consumer-oriented society. A desire to disturb the pernicious patterns of egoism and materialism drove her radical political critique, her refusal to accumulate wealth or possessions, her underground journeys to Cuba. Marian saw our selfish and consumption-oriented ways of life as a kind of ultimate estrangement from our true self and ground of being. For her, an ego- and wealth-worshipping society was hell. Always inclined toward disruption and transformation, Marian refused to water down her message to accommodate the expectations of the society around her. This non-conformist attitude applied equally to progressives’ expectations as to conservatives’. For example, Marian raised eyebrows among her progressive friends by taking to referring to herself as a “pentecostal”, based on the biblical claim that we are spoken to directly by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, she did not shrink from identifying herself as an evangelical:

*Evangelism and new church development are at the heart of being church! They provide the steam that drives the engine, the fuel that keeps the fire burning. They are both the result of faith and the source of faith! The Great Commission is central to who we are!!! The early church knew this and grew; some of our churches have forgotten it and have shriveled, not only in numbers but in joy, in excitement, in faith. Telling these stories to coming generations is at the heart of evangelism, at the heart of spreading the Good News. Don’t let anybody else have a copyright on that word, okay? Claim the word Evangelical for yourselves!! C.S. Lewis said that Christianity is either of the UTMOST importance or it is of NO importance. [Fear, Yes, Trembling, Yes—That Sounds About Right! Sermon at Suisun Fairfield UCC, September 26, 1999]*

To be sure, Marian’s ministry was staunchly progressive; for example, she was about as “open and affirming” as one could be. But she was also not afraid to embrace traditional elements, such as making the Amistad mission “Christ-centered”, or embracing the Eucharist:

*I think that a new church start, to be faithful, must have the Eucharist encoded in its DNA. The bread of life and cup of blessing are the constituting elements of Christian community; it is by sharing them in Christ’s name that we “re-member” Christ’s Body and create community where previously there was no community.*

**Intolerance-Free Zone**
Marian declared her life an Intolerance-Free Zone. Integrating anthropological perspective with biblical witness, Marian cherished human diversity as a gift from God. She adeptly and lovingly engaged other cultures as she traveled in Cuba, Mexico, Japan, and the Philippines. She enjoyed conversing in Spanish, taught herself the rudiments of Japanese, and often chose hymns in other languages. Continuing to deepen her intercultural knowledge through her fifties and sixties, she took evening courses in African-American History, Multicultural Studies, History of the Philippines, Hispanic Culture, and Hispanic Literature.

In the wake of 9/11, when she saw her Muslim neighbors persecuted as if they were terrorists or traitors, Marian reached out to the Islamic community. In 2017, at age 75, she began to learn Arabic as an act of solidarity and resistance to the travel ban. As a peacemaker, she saw all people—regardless of creed or color—as children of God.

While denouncing egoistic consumption as idolatry, Marian respected other wisdom traditions as much as her own:

*Are we commissioned to make Christians out of Jews and Muslims and Hindus? I think not... For myself, when I meet a person of faith I respect that faith tradition, rejoicing in the opportunity for real interfaith conversation. Are we commissioned to share the Way of Jesus—the Way of self-sacrifice, the Way of community, the Way of inclusiveness, the Way of peace with justice—with those around us who worship a god of individualism and materialism? Yes, absolutely.* [Why Are You Still Here? Sermon for Great Commission Sunday, May 18, 2008, Community Congregational United Church of Christ, Benicia, CA]

In her final years, Marian became increasingly active in interfaith work:

*We got involved in Tri-Valley Interfaith Interconnect. They hold informational meet-and-greets at various houses of worship like the Muslim Community Center and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints here in Pleasanton, the Shiva-Vishnu temple and St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Livermore, and our back-fence neighbors at Congregation Beth Emek on Bernal in Pleasanton. We’ve met lots of interesting folks at those gatherings! Through the Interfaith Interconnect events we got connected with some folks at the Muslim Community Center Mosque. I’ve been to several events and open houses there and now celebrate a few of their members as my Facebook friends! One of my favorite events was a “Hands Around the Mosque” event during Friday services where Christians and Jews showed our support for and celebration of our Muslim neighbors.* [“Spotlight on your neighbor”, Vineyard Estates magazine, July 2017]

Though a committed Christian, Marian had no patience for religious dogma or criticizing others in Jesus’s name:

*One of my greatest pains in life is the arrogant intolerance practiced in the name of Jesus who—so far as I can tell from a pretty close read of scripture—despised rigid and dogmatic religious intolerance and preferred the company of sinners to that of saints.

I also try to observe the Jewish sabbath with rest, candles and prayer, and I follow the phases of the moon in my heart.*
One Body: Intercommunal reconciliation

Marian saw social boundaries and hierarchy as an affront against God’s absolute love for every person. As a young mother, Marian chose to raise her children in a multiracial section of West Berkeley, where they would learn to see the world through more than one lens. In her thirties she transferred her church membership to an interracial congregation in South Berkeley. She also boldly disregarded the political boundaries meant to prevent Americans from traveling to Cuba, where she would tell her hosts:

Me llamo Mariana, soy de los Estados Unidos, les traigo saludos de los vecinos de mi cuadra en Berkeley, California. Anoche vi la luna, brillando en el cielo, igual sobre mi país y el suyo—parece que ningún bloqueo la puede prohibir...
(My name is Marian, I’m from the U.S. I bring you greetings from the neighbors on my block in Berkeley, California. Last night I saw the moon shining there in the sky, on my country and yours alike—it appears that no blockade can keep it from shining...)

[Vacas flacas y sueños rotos: Diary of a sojourn to Mexico and Cuba (1995)]

And in her fifties, Marian turned a blind eye to the class boundaries that might discourage a Berkeleyan from moving to a place like Vacaville, so distant from the cultural and intellectual milieu of a major university.

Marian also ignored the sometimes forbidding boundaries between different congregations, worshipping at one time or another with African-Americans in West Oakland, Chinese-Americans in West Berkeley, Samoan immigrants in San Leandro, Mexican-Americans in Berkeley, Filipino immigrants in Vallejo, rural European-Americans in the Central Valley, and many other groups across well over a hundred houses of worship in Northern California alone. She worshipped too with congregations in Mexico, Cuba, and the Philippines. Ever disdainful of artificial boundaries, she did not hesitate to participate in Catholic mass, as on Ash Wednesday in 1999 at St. Joseph the Worker in Berkeley:

I went forward for the ashes, of course, and also for the Eucharist. It’s a little like staying in relationship with ex-in-laws of one kind or another; I have no quarrel with them, I never divorced anybody, why should I comply with the rules of schism? This is my habit—to receive the Eucharist. Father Bill (O’Donnell) was cool with it. That felt good. [Sabbatical journal (1999), p. 15]
Among Marian’s things was found a collection of photos she had taken in 1974 of numerous houses of worship around Berkeley and Oakland. She had photographed the grand sanctuaries near UC Berkeley as well as the rickety one-story chapels in the humble parts of town. She was drawn to be in communion with other congregations and to share that which connects us all.

Later in life, she would set out to visit nearly all the Northern California congregations of the United Church of Christ. Like an ethnographer of religion, she kept detailed journals of her “Sunday sojourns”, thoughtfully recording her observations of each congregation’s approach to the divine, as well as her own reactions as a participant. For example, she mused on the religious boomerang she observed in the Filipino-American UCC churches, such as Faith Community UCC in Oakland:

*I love worshiping in Fil-Am congregations—the people are warm and welcoming, the food and fellowship are good, and it gives me a delightful sense of déjà vu—I’ve seen all this before, and it was when I was a kid in the 1950’s! But to me the most distinctive mark of Filipino-American worship is that there is no discernible Filipino content to it! At least these NCNC-UCC Fil-Am congregations—all of which, I think, trace their pastoral lineage to the Silliman University Divinity School—are like an early-20th century mission movement come back like a boomerang to mission to us. I never, ever sing “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” or “Onward Christian Soldiers” or “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations” any more—except when I’m singing those songs with the heirs of the missionaries who carried Protestant Christianity to the Catholic Philippines! [“Association: A year of Sunday sojourns” (2005), p. 12]*

Marian knew that the diverse Norcal UCC congregations are united spiritually in One Body:

*The closing hymn, “Guide My Feet”, was the same one we sang last week at SBCC when Rev. Perry was our guest preacher. As we sang, he smiled at me and gave a “thumbs up!” to indicate*
he had gotten the idea from us! And that was a wonderful moment for me, a piercing awareness of the connectedness of this whole enterprise—the spiritual worldwide web that exists between all worshipping congregations everywhere—where a song can be sung in one place one week, then carried in someone’s head and heart to another place the next week, a strong silver web of song and sentiment that weaves us together and makes us One. [Sabbatical journal (1999), p. 3]

She longed for the UCC’s rich diversity of congregations to be united not only through the Spirit, but also through personal connections and exchange. She wrote about worship at a Samoan congregation in a converted garage under the BART tracks on 147th Ave. in San Leandro:

I felt very moved to be there, worshiping with them; I felt a strong bond of faith. The converted garage reminded me of the little old shack-church on the hillside in Basak on Cebu Island (Philippines)... And then my mind and heart wandered to the distant places I have worshiped...and I felt so strongly that greetings shared between these bodies-of-the-Body are like life blood pulsing through a living, breathing Organism. I covet for our Bay Association more opportunities for visiting one another in worship and carrying back-and-forth greetings between congregations. [“Association: A year of Sunday sojourns” (2005), p. 10]

**Faith in community**

Marian espoused *ethical* individualism—respecting the dignity of all persons as human beings—but opposed *consumerist* individualism, what one might call egoism. In keeping with her commitment to the equality and rights of all persons, she advocated for individual freedom and choice. But she insisted that individuals be oriented not toward themselves, but toward their community, and that they exercise their personal freedoms on its behalf. The pursuit of personal satisfaction—even of the spiritual kind—was, for her, a source of self-limitation:

*I have a deep-seated mistrust of what has seemed to me like feel-good warm-fuzzy spirituality that focuses on some kind of personal high instead of on the increase of peace, justice and community in the world.*

*I don’t want “my” spiritual experience co-opted by the weekend-enlightenment retreat circuit (“experience the healing environment and indigenous wisdom of the ancient female mysteries in a sacred wilderness pilgrimage on the spiritual path of the great dance of integral energies using myth and ritual to achieve oneness...only $395”). Nor do I wish to co-opt the genuine moving of Spirit in the name of yet another developmental ritual for the Divine Order of Boomers. I can’t help but thinking that the Holy One—blessed be S/he—has something more in mind for the planet.*

Marian’s religiosity was more of the communal than the introspective type. Accordingly, her spirit was less inclined to be moved by yogic reflection than by witnessing injustice or suffering around her:

*Most spiritual-type meditations (and ALL guided meditations to date) bore me. But from time to time the Hand of God/dess has grabbed me by the gut and shaken me like a cat shaking a mouse...I have encountered Jesus more often in hell than in heaven—so that is where I tend to look for Him now.*

Throughout her life Marian regarded community as the indispensable pathway to the experience of ultimate oneness. For her, exile from community was a form of dehumanization. The detached individual finds herself, she believed, trapped in a narrow, personally constructed, and ultimately illusory world. She insisted that

*a faith community is a precondition of faith. My spiritual disciplines include going to church whether I feel like it or not.*
I, too, love the woods and solitude—but tend to need a community of faith for the long haul. It comes in handy during times of illness, doubt and death. But it sure can be a major pain in the butt sometimes...

**Only love builds: Callings to Cuba**

As noted above, Marian spent time in Cuba in 1981 investigating the “theology of revolution” under the mentorship of Rev. Sergio Arce and his wife Dora Valentin, both of the Evangelical Seminary in Matanzas. This relationship led to a poigniant return visit in 1995:

> My friendship with Dora and Arce deepened over the years, including affectionate reunions each time they returned to the Bay Area. Their last visit was in 1990, I think—the last time I ever saw Dora. As Arce and I parted that time, we shared a sense that something momentous was going to happen in the world that would change the future for both of us. Within a year the Soviet Union had dissolved—how utterly unthinkable and unimaginable that had been!—and Cuba was thrown into an economic crisis from which it hasn’t yet emerged.

> Shortly after that Dora’s heart literally broke, and she died. I learned of her death from a mutual friend who set out to raise funds to rebuild a little chapel in Varadero, Cuba as a memorial—so of course I sent some money. I didn’t hear anything for a year or more—then last spring, out of the blue, a phone call from the same friend invited me to the dedication of the chapel—the first new house of worship opened in Cuba since the Revolution—dedicated to the glory of God and to the memory of Dora. I believe I was invited on this journey as a way of refreshing my resurrection hope here in the waning years of the 20th century.

On her second trip to Cuba, Marian set out to deliver a significant sum of dollars she had gathered as donations for the new church. The trip was a complicated and somewhat perilous affair, requiring her to travel without U.S. government permission, carrying a bundle of cash (money could not be wired), journeying by way of Mexico, and foregoing every form of material luxury. A true test of faith. And right up Marian’s alley!

She wrote that she embarked on this difficult journey in search of hope. From the journal she kept, one gathers that she did it for other reasons as well: to defy human-imposed barriers; to reach across differences; and to seek ideas for a deeper integration between faith and the world. In her Cuban host church hung a hand-lettered banner proclaiming “Una Iglesia que Afirmá, Profundíz, y Experimentá Su
Fe en un Mundo en Crisis”—a church that affirms, deepens, and experiences its faith in a world in crisis. “I rather assume it was this that I came to Cuba to see. I pray God to know some way to carry this faith, this hope, home to South Berkeley Community Church”.

Marian certainly did not go to Cuba as a missionary (her “mission field” was the soul-parched, love-starved, and community-less cities and suburbs of good ol’ California). No, Marian did not go to Cuba to teach, but to learn:

*On the church bulletin board is a list of the church’s goals and plans for the upcoming year—increase our outreach to the neighborhood, increase lay participation in worship leadership, develop our music program, visit the sick, stuff like that—I ask Pastor Carlos how they arrived at these goals and whether I can have a copy—he says (a wee bit sarcastically it seems to me) “you mean YOU want something from US—a poor, struggling little mission church always on the receiving end of charity?” I tell him I’ve come to Cuba looking for a bit of faith and hope, as we seem to have lost both in my church at home.*

Marian combined a realistic view of the economic and administrative shortcomings of Cuba’s communist system—and a profound aversion toward its controls on personal choice and expression—with an Anglo-American’s admiration for the Cuban people’s personal warmth, sense of community, and collective orientation to non-materialistic goals. She admired that in Cuba children were showered with love, not things. She was drawn more by the people’s simple lifestyle and collective unity than by any belief in communism as a historical prophecy, political ideology, or viable economic model. It is thus unsurprising that the figure who truly spoke to her was neither Castro nor Guevara, but Martí. His famous verse about simplicity and shared poverty touched her soul:

*Con los pobres de la tierra*  
*Quiero yo mi suerte echar;*  
*El arroyo de la sierra*  
*Me complace más que el mar.*

*(Let me share my fate  
*With the poor, land-bound folk;*  
*I covet not the grand sea  
*But the murmuring brook.)*

*[Jose Martí, Versos sencillos, poem III, stanza 2]*
Perhaps the most prevalent theme in Marian’s Cuba journal is that of “community and shared values”. She described, for example, a conversation with South American trip-mates about

the privatization of faith, a peculiarly North American phenomenon. We all agree it is a root cause of social disintegration and personal alienation—of people who are “no people” and community which is “no community”. For faith (spirituality) is not an individual commodity but a gift of community. Maria speaks movingly of the “busqueda” (search) for a spirituality of values and community in the midst of material wealth—I think all of us from the so-called “developed” countries have been touched by the sense of community and shared values we’ve seen on this terribly undeveloped little island. They have next to nothing in a material sense—but their social contract seems not to have broken down as ours has. We talk about how we try to fill the inner emptiness with things, things, things—but how the hunger is actually for community. How the Christian gospel is distorted and perverted when it becomes one of individual salvation, of blessings on individual health or wealth or success—in many ways our gospel story is a socialist one, more at home in this socialist land than in our materialistic ones.

As these lines reveal, Marian looked to Cuba—or rather, to the life of a small Christian community within Cuba—in search of what a gospel-inspired community might look like in our own time. She hoped, one gathers, to find a community that might approximate a historical fulfillment of prophetic values, embedded within a national economic structure that could assure basic security and social fairness. Matanzas was Marian’s Zion.

Now she knew full well that Castro’s system had failed to provide the foundation for such utopias. She noted, for example, that “the water and sewage systems are disintegrating, roads are a disaster, and there are periodic blackouts to save electricity”. But from her biblical angle of vision, a reasonable level of material privation was not such a bad thing (“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”). After all, for Marian, the pursuit of personal wealth was a misplacement of the heart, a pathway to estrangement from one’s true self. To her what national wealth was good for was basic goods like education, public safety, and health care—and in these areas Cuba had much to admire. Above all what Marian sought was not “development” but community and shared non-materialistic values. For, as Martí attested, “Sólo el amor construye” (“Only love builds”).

16
Personal resistance plan

Marian regarded the church as the guardian of the powerless and the moral conscience of the state. She accepted involvement in the politics of her community and nation as a sacred duty, participating in political campaigns, marching in demonstrations, joining in vigils to oppose prisoner executions, organizing petition drives, writing letters and “From the pulpit” columns to her local newspaper, hosting Candidates’ Nights in her home, and never shrinking from speaking truth to power. She was radically independent in her politics, and would criticize one party as readily as another. She began organizing support for Barack Obama in Solano County long before he became a national candidate, and saw his 2008 victory as a historic fulfillment of her nation’s moral potential.

She also lived to witness a historic crisis in her nation’s moral leadership and the rise of a modern-day Herod. Affirming her belief in the God-given dignity and equality of all persons, she chose not to despise or denigrate the supporters of this shallow and self-absorbed man, but to reach out to them with a patient love and neighborly spirit.

She had followed the same principle back in 2003 when she reached out in fellowship to Bush supporters in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq:

The Rev. Marian Conning of the United Church of Christ’s Amistad community in Vacaville is determined to bridge the gap between those who stand for peace and those who stand for the troops.

Both groups have taken to gathering in front of City Hall on Saturday mornings. During one recent encounter, Conning had an epiphany: “It is foolish to pray for the success of diplomacy while being estranged and unable to communicate with our own neighbors down by the Veterans Memorial” she wrote in an e-mail. “To be polarized in sentiment, estranged in reality, and unwilling to be in direct communication with our neighbors feels to me like being dragged into the ethos of war itself, rather than trying to create a circle of genuine peace in our own community.”

Conning has begun walking over to the “Support Our Troops” rally and visiting with its participants. “I am convinced that all of us hate war,” she wrote. “We disagree at a fairly profound level about the best way to move toward peace, but we all want it.” [“Heroes appear all over”, Vacaville Reporter, undated]

While extending a hand of fellowship to Bush supporters and Trump supporters alike, Marian denounced the current president’s embrace of bigotry, nationalism, authoritarianism, egoism, misogyny, personal hostility, dishonesty, greed and environmental abuse. She denounced it as a moral abomination, a threat to the soul of her national community, and a form of public sin. She abhorred such values as an estrangement from God, and committed herself to a twelve-point “personal resistance plan”:

• Engage more with Muslim neighbors here in Pleasanton by attending interfaith events and Muslim Center open houses and by shopping at Halal markets and other places where Muslims shop and work. Try to talk with an ordinary Muslim every day.
• Try to speak Spanish with someone at least once a week, which will require hanging out where Mexican immigrants and other Spanish speakers are.
• Work to improve my Spanish by switching Facebook settings to Spanish, by setting my homepage to Yahoo Español, by reading an occasional Spanish language book or magazine, and by listening to Spanish radio.
• Daily practice with my Rosetta Stone course in Arabic.
• Read something from the Gospels and Acts every day.
• Continue re-reading books by James Baldwin and other noted Black authors and solicit recommendations from Black friends about new Black Lives Matter books. Pray for wisdom as I read.
• Try to mostly read news stories from the New York Times and Al Jazeera English.
• Continue to interact with and have conversation with friends, neighbors and Facebook folks who have different social, political and religious views. Cherish the friendships and learn from the differences.
• Make regular donations to the NAACP, the ACLU, CAIR and the Jubilee USA Network. Donate to progressive political candidates as I can.
• Participate in the 2017 Bread for the World Offering of Letters.
• Walk, exercise and try to eat healthy.
• Plant a garden, get my hands in the soil as often as I can.

Marian pursued a ministry of reconciliation by seeking justice for all groups, and confronting “the sinful structures which enslave us and estrange us”. She sought equal rights, opportunities, and freedoms for all groups. She advocated on behalf of many whose voices have been silenced or suppressed: LGBT youth and queer folk, people of color, war refugees, and undocumented immigrants, among others. As a college student, she participated in a sit-in on San Francisco’s auto row to protest the exclusion of black customers. Whenever she visited a church or other public building for the first time, she looked around to assess its accessibility to the disabled.

As a feminist, Marian insisted on the fair distribution of household chores among family members:
the one issue that I have always found MOST threatening to the institution of marriage and the family in these enlightened times is—NOT homosexuality as the Radical Right would have us believe—but housework.

She also helped advance the feminist cause by leading a women’s discussion group at Eden Hayward Congregational, and by never masking the female reality in her conversations or speeches, such as her 1995 sermon about menopausal hot flashes (“They’re Power Surges!”)

A cry goes up in the churches of America—“we need more young people!” But if you look around, you’ll see what God keeps sending us: middle-aged women! Middle-aged women talking about fresh new currents of spiritual experience. Middle-aged women hearing a call to a new kind of ministry. Middle-aged women wanting to bring to the community what women have traditionally brought to the family: nurture, connection, a sense of history, and healing.

She referred to these “power surges” as the source of a “powerful healing and transforming energy” for the community.
Marian stood in awe of the natural world and rejoiced in its boundless beauty and exquisite interrelationships. She was humbled by the infinite mystery of outer space and by humankind’s inescapable dependence on this one Earth. As a member of the nation that consumes the highest share of this planet’s resources, she felt a sacred responsibility to reconcile its way of life with the sustainability of all creation, and to stand against the wanton destruction of our natural environment. She felt a compassionate concern for all living things, lamented humankind’s self-interested ransacking of nature, and denounced as false prophecy the notion that Earth was created for human ends alone.

Marian marked Earth Day as a hallowed sacrament in her congregation’s liturgical calendar. Wherever she walked, whether in national parks or on city streets, she carried a bag and picked up litter. When the last open space between Vacaville and Fairfield was threatened by suburban sprawl, she organized the Friends of Lagoon Valley to preserve that place as a natural sanctuary. She insisted on using public transportation whenever possible, even at great inconvenience, and gave away the family’s second car as an unnecessary luxury. When she learned that the junk mail in the mailroom of her Pleasanton senior park was not being recycled, she began hauling it in a handcart to her home recycling bin. Her degree of self-discipline in reducing, reusing, and recycling—and her daily advocacy of these practices among her neighbors in Berkeley, Vacaville, and Pleasanton—could only be described as religious.
Humility and simple living

Marian was a practical and unpretentious person. She hung her family’s clothing out to dry on a clothesline—underwear and all. She expressed herself directly and in plain language. When she needed to call her children to dinner from whatever corner of the neighborhood they had wandered to, she stood on the front porch and loudly rang a cowbell. Whether talking to her children about sex or preaching to the congregation on the topic of menopause, she spoke forthrightly, making no concession to pretense or dissimulation.

Marian had no interest in the magnificent or grandiose. She did not spend her vacations in Paris or London, New York or Hawaii. Instead she journeyed to the overlooked places where she might encounter ordinary people and observe their daily experience. From her angle of vision, the mundane was mysterious, the everyday exalted.

When some would have booked a Rhine cruise, Marian opted instead for a weekend roundtrip voyage on the Altamont Commuter Express, getting to know the daily martyrdom of mega-commuting laborers unable to afford housing in Silicon Valley. During her numerous trips to Mexico, Marian was not to be found at the tourist magnets like Cozumel or San Blas, but in places that are of Mexicans, by Mexicans, and for Mexicans—places like the shrine of Guadalupe, downtown Tlaxcala, and the workers’ district of Cancún. And her journeys to the Philippines were no getaways to the breezy beaches of Palawan; rather, they were missions to the rural church communities of Cebu that Amistad supported.

Marian eschewed personal luxuries and was careful to preserve resources for charity and other important purposes. With the selfless, frugal, and transparent manner in which she lived, she earned the trust of her community and was frequently called to financial stewardship. The list of churches and other civic organizations where she served as Treasurer is long: South Berkeley Community Church, the World Institute on Disability, the SBCC Hunger Program, Amistad United Church of Christ, the Oakland YWCA, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in Solano County, the Vacaville CROP Walk, and The United Christian Church of Livermore, among others.
Irreverend Conning

One sign of Marian’s humility and aversion to status distinctions was her commitment to lead through lay ministry, despite her intellectual acumen and formal seminary training. She noted that “lay ministry and lay witness, often Spirit-filled and sometimes Spirit-led, have been woven into the fabric of American Protestantism”. She felt that as a lay leader she could be clearer in her vocation, perhaps purer in her heart. Her models of ministry were comunidades de base, Catholic Worker houses, and above all the original house churches known to us from the Acts of the Apostles. As her longtime friend Rev. Nancy McKay elegantly eulogized, Marian “successfully resisted ordination. Hers was a Biblical and common sense ministry”. Knowing that Marian’s non-ordained status had been hard-earned and principled, her colleagues sometimes lovingly honored her with the title “the Irreverend Marian Conning”. Never has a person more thoroughly deserved that title.

A Protestant to the core, Marian firmly believed in the “priesthood of all believers”. She insisted that all baptized Christians are ministers, and argued that the popular misidentification of “ministry” with “ordained clergy” was a flaw and failure of the Christian church. When she was asked to issue the charge at the ordination of a new minister she had mentored, she enjoined him “not to let people forget that it is baptism, not ordination, that ‘make’ one a minister. Try to think of yourself as leading a group of ministers instead of tending a flock of sheep.”

When she founded the Amistad mission, Marian still resisted ordination, instead seeking denominational authorization via the unconventional route of “licensed lay ministry”. This permitted her to perform pastoral duties (including administration of the sacraments) without acquiring a personal status that might have threatened to distinguish her from the other members of her congregation, dampen their initiative, or seduce her own ego.

Personal struggles

Now and then Marian grieved over the inescapable tension between her cherished ideals of community and diversity. In particular, she struggled with the many challenges inherent in multicultural worship, from musical preferences to expectations for prayer and homily. She knew that good worship must strum
the soul, but she also knew that culture sets our soulstrings to a specific pitch and that unfamiliar melodies can feel jarringly out of tune. She wondered how the hearts of a diverse congregation could be moved together:

*Should we clap? Should we hug? Should we say ‘Amen’? There’s always that unspoken question,*

*that tension between cultural expectations and memories of childhood church and present identity and personal feelings of exuberance or reserve or class consciousness (or even of embarrassment). That tension seems to be one of the givens when a congregation wants to be inclusive and diverse—but it always seems to be hanging there, in the air, doesn’t it? I wonder if it would just be better to talk about it.* [Sabbatical journal (1999), p. 9]

Marian lamented that we find ourselves having to choose between diversity and being able to sing our beloved hymns the way we want to. She fretted over the implications:

*There appears to be some kind of ecclesiastical entropy at work in intentionally diverse faith communities, always pulling people back toward childhood memories of “Black” church or “White” church or whatever their earliest church image is. The desire to be diverse has to be strong enough to overcome that.* [Sabbatical journal (1999), p. 35]

Marian even confessed to sometimes experiencing a painful loneliness at SBCC, and wondering if that might be an inevitable result of her unusual role in a unique interracial church.

Like us, Marian struggled with personal failings. She needed to pray for strength not to seek solitude when her companionship was needed, not to be anxious when calm was in order, not to be irritable when patience was best, not to be intransigent when cooperation was called for. Sometimes she treated being contrary as an end in itself. Sometimes she treated being contrary as an end in itself. Why sometimes she could even be manipulative. We give thanks for the grace given us to patiently endure her failings, as she did ours.

**Here I am, send me**

*and i said who me?*
*and He said yes you*
*and i said*
*“but i’m not ready yet*
*and an important meeting is coming up*
*and i can’t leave my work right now*
*and you know there is no one to take my place” and He said “you’re stalling”*
*again the Lord said go*
*and i said but i don’t want to*
*and He said “I didn’t ask if you wanted to” and i said*
*“Listen i’m not the kind of person*
*to get involved in controversy*
*besides my family won’t like it and what will my neighbors think” and He said “baloney”*
*and yet a third time the Lord said go and i said “do i have to?”*
*and He said “do you love me?”*
*and i said*
*“look i’m scared*
*people are going to hate me*
*and cut me up into little pieces*
*I can’t take it all by myself”*
*and He said “where do you think I’ll be?”*
and the Lord said go and i sighed
“here i am send me.”
- The Rev. George F. Tittman

In her late fifties, Marian decided she had reached the stage of life when it was appropriate to be prophetic—to attempt to speak for God regarding the direction her church and community should take. She was ready to take bold risks and assume the authority to bring about change.

**A new vision for SBCC**

In the period after a severe heart attack had sharpened her awareness of her own mortality, she began articulating a vision for a much-needed revitalization of her South Berkeley Community Church. She preached on the subject, spoke regularly with her fellow congregants, and in 1998 began bringing the issue to a head with a series of letters addressed the whole congregation.

*Between the New Apostolic churches on one hand, the growing Interfaith movement on the other hand, and a rational, materialist, individualist secular culture all around us—we are living in the midst of one of the greatest periods of change and turmoil since the time of Constantine.*

*We can’t be church in a vacuum—our life together, our participation in the body of Christ, is utterly dependent on connections to the community, to the conference, to our sister churches, to the world around us, and to the wider church of Jesus Christ. I am absolutely convinced—I see with my own eyes, I hear with my own ears—that the church of Jesus Christ on this corner and around the world is undergoing a spirit of renewal akin to the experience of the Early Church, akin to the experience of the Protestant Reformation. If we dare, we can be in the vanguard of that renewal...*  

She described a vision of a more Spirit-infused, mission-driven, socially involved, courageously prophetic, and radically inclusive church. In this vision, the church would not have an ordained pastor, but instead a lay leadership team. Marian proposed to be the unsalaried “lay pastor”, leading a team to coordinate worship, music, outreach, evangelism, pastoral care and congregational life and ministry. She proposed that the money budgeted for a pastor’s salary, housing, and benefits be redirected to deferred building maintenance and hiring a Minister of Music.

Marian encouraged her congregation to take an active role in their church’s ministry, and not just passively hope that the “right pastor” would come along and solve their problems:

*One model of ministry—the more traditional one—assumes that the agent of renewal for us will be “the right pastor”, a qualified, charismatic and ordained person coming from outside of this congregation to lead us into a new day. This is the model under which we have been operating for many years, each time hoping that “this will be the one!” It does not require a great deal of change coming from within the congregation, only the calling of “the right pastor” from without....  
An alternative model of ministry—the model on which my proposal for Lay Pastor/Leadership Team is based—claims that we have already been saved through the Christ event and that the agent of our renewal is already within us. I do believe that we have within our congregation the resources we need to participate in God’s plans for renewal and new life....*  

**No backward looks**

Marian believed that the essence of a revitalized church would need to be *mission*:

- *Mission in the sense of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with our neighbors, in words and deeds that will convey that reality in contemporary terms;*
Mission in the sense of social service outreach programs…making this church the locus of a social service center for the community;

Mission in the sense of Our Church’s Wider Mission, support of the wider ministries of the UCC… It’s time for us to stop pleading poverty...

She contrasted this outward, mission-focused model with a defensive, survival-focused model. As we have seen, Marian believed the Spirit’s essential tendency is not to defend existing patterns but to transform them.

In this spirit, she advocated for SBCC to look beyond its inherited traditions, routines, and physical plant to see their essence in a first-century spirit of mission and revolutionary renewal. She argued that it was better for Christians to start a new church than to be lured by habit and tradition into preserving an inert one. A handwritten note was found among Marian’s things that reads “Survival is not our business”. She argued that the proper goal for a Christian community was not maintenance, but motion; not conservation, but conversion; not reinforcement; but rebirth:

*It is always a mistake to confuse a building with the living God… Your business is life, not death… No backward looks.* [No Backward Looks, Sermon at SBCC, March 11, 2007].

She bravely and breathlessly asked for the congregation’s support:

*I really do see this vision, my friends. It can happen, and it can happen now. We have enough money to make it happen. There is nothing—there is not one thing—on these pages that cannot be a reality within three years. Most of it can happen in one year. We need leadership, planning, hard work, imagination, and—above all—faith. Will you help me to make the vision real? We have to get busy right away…*

Ultimately, a majority of the SBCC congregation decided that Marian’s proposal for an alternative, laity-led, mission-oriented church model was more radical than they were prepared to embrace, and her vision became the seed for a new church launch in an unexpected place.

**Launching the Amistad**

Sometime in late 1998 or early 1999, Marian began broadcasting her vision and seeking feedback as to how and where it might best be realized. She read widely about the process and pitfalls of “planting” a church, visited dozens of congregations to experience their modes of worship, and asked scores of people for advice.

*I’ve heard from almost 40 people—retired pastors, immigrant pastors, people who’ve started churches recently or earlier in their careers, folks in care and folks in interim ministry, folks trying to get a handle on new church development as part of their wider church responsibilities, chaplains and scholars and consultants and spiritual directors, folks hoping—beyond-hope for more fire and wind in their worship experience and spirit life, and folks wondering whether it’s time to leave the Church behind as they continue their own spiritual journey in a post-Christendom world. These conversations have been good and rich, full of the telling of stories. It’s my sense that there is hope afoot for genuine Christian community and for new ways of being church. It’s my sense that this is a time that’s ripe for new church starts! God calls, God still longs to create Community out of people who are no-community.*

Marian and Keith eventually decided to pursue the venture in the former produce-packing town of Vacaville, CA. But this was no quiet retirement to a secluded suburb! No, Vacaville’s sprawl of residential subdivisions and shopping complexes had become Marian’s mission field. With its predominantly conservative ethos, prevalence of outlet stores and strip malls, and absence of UCC ministry, this former site of onion farms and fruit orchards seemed like fertile ground for her church plant:
There are 58 churches in this fast-growing town/city of almost 100,000 people—a great chorus of praise to God—yet the voice of the United Church of Christ is missing from that chorus. With the exception of Vacaville Christian Church, DOC and brave St. Paul’s UMC, the “liberal” voice is pretty much absent. There is no Quaker Meeting and no Unitarian Universalist fellowship. There is a real niche and need for us here.

Here we are in 1999 and somehow we’ve discovered that the Mission Field is the Solano Mall, and the crowds on which Jesus takes compassion—harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, are the eager shoppers at the Outlet Malls, are the hot-and-thirsty crowds at Marine World, spending money like water and wandering around desperately in search of joy and truth and meaning and community.

Marian had found her mission site—not in Cuba or the Philippines or Africa or China, but right at home in post-Christendom North America—in a shopping outpost floating amidst a fragmented, centerless culture guided not by any wisdom tradition or communal ethos but by the pursuit of ego satisfaction.

Having chosen a site, Marian undertook the daunting tasks of pulling up stakes after 34 years in West Berkeley, establishing a new home in Vacaville, acquiring UCC authorization, and building the scores of relationships essential to getting a new congregation off the ground. She reached out to hundreds of people with a vision for starting a “prayer-believing, justice-seeking, diverse, affirming, hope-filled and Christ-centered community in Solano County”.

She pursued her mission with an urgency, an insistence, a headlong abandon that was breathtaking to behold. The list of obstacles she overcame in realizing this mission was staggering. Pastor and friend Jerry De Jong witnessed this period of Marian’s life and testified that she was engaged in a “dangerous and liberating ministry”:

Marian has had the audacity to claim that the Holy Spirit called her to plant a church in Vacaville and attempt to enter into a recognized ministry with our denomination. Surely, Marian is a fool for Christ.

This is a woman who even though she attended seminary, never opted for ordination in the ministry. She just opened up the doors of her home and invited people in to worship and to share in the table which Christ has prepared. She also has taken a leadership role with Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in Solano County. She is sitting down, eating and drinking and talking with anyone who wants to know God and Jesus of Nazareth. Thanks be to God.

Marian possessed special gifts for this mission. Those familiar with her knew that her deep and genuine love for people made her a natural evangelist. One wrote:

Marian is the person who has demonstrated most to me what it means to be a Christian. Knowing her, watching her live her life, working with her, hearing her speak with children, young people, old people, sick and disturbed as well as healthy people, is inspirational.

Another attested:

In the 1970’s when Browne Barr was Senior Minister at First Congregational Church of Berkeley, he told me if he were to start a new church, he would want to take two people with him. Marian was one of them.

Marian chose to name her new congregation Amistad. An article about it in the local paper explained the story behind its name:

“Amistad” means “friendship” in Spanish. It was also the name of an 1839 Cuban ship carrying slaves who revolted and tried to sail back to Africa. Instead, the ship ended up in Connecticut, where courts ultimately ruled that the slaves should be freed to return to their homeland.
Africans were defended by members of the Congregational Church, which went on to help lead the abolitionist movement (the Congregational Church was a forerunner of the modern UCC).

About the time that Conning was choosing a name for the Vacaville congregation, the United Church of Christ was helping launch a new Amistad ship as a floating museum devoted to teaching the history of slavery.

“[It felt so right to connect the Spanish word and the UCC’s justice heritage],” says Conning. “We are a liberal, justice-oriented organization.”

The symbol of the Amistad also conveyed Marian’s conception of a mission-in-motion. She had begun thinking of the new congregation less as a church “plant” (intended to remain in place, like a tree) and more as the launching of a ship (intended to go where the Spirit blows it). Here she noted the words of Melville: “the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow”. She envisioned a “floating” congregation, one that owned neither building nor property, and which would not be bound to a particular location. By doing without a building, money that would otherwise be spent on a building can be spent on mission. It’s more intimate and allows for greater participation. It allows for an itinerant church—one that gets out into the community and the world.
A first-century church for the twenty-first century

Amistad usually gathered for worship on Friday evenings at Marian and Keith’s home adjoining Alamo Creek Park. Services typically began with a shared meal at a very long table. This setting and format of worship was conducive to a direct and immediate communion with the Holy Spirit: worshipping around a table, looking at each other face-to-face, receiving the Eucharist each one. As Marian put it,

_Those of us worshipping in a home, around a table, tend to remember more clearly where we came from. We remember that we’re at a meal and not at a performance. And we can’t avoid the fact that we’re looking the Risen Christ in the eye, right across the table!_

The house church format also linked Amistad with the earliest Christian congregations and their Jewish history:

_The earliest Christian churches were, of course, house churches. We at Amistad refer to ourselves as “a 1st century church for the 21st century”... The REASON the early churches were house churches is that their style of worship and community were derived directly from the Jewish home-based Sabbath service that was a legacy of the Babylonian exile! After the destruction of the 1st Jerusalem temple in 586 B.C.E. and the exile of the Jews to Babylon, they could no longer identify themselves by their Temple practices...So the very first Christians—who were, of course, Jews like Jesus—met in homes like the Jews._

What made Amistad a true “first-century church” was not only its agape meal format, but also its virtual absence of hierarchy, institutional organization, physical plant, or inert traditions. With no ordained clergy, the congregation was a discipleship of equals. Practically free of institutional baggage, it was able to engage in a disruptive Christian mission. With few worldly interests to protect, it did not have to worry about survival, and could instead direct its ministry outward, in a first-century spirit of radical criticism and world renewal. With few inherited patterns to conform to, it could listen for fresh and contemporary truths, which God speaks to us still.

Amistad’s unique mission and conspicuous social activism made a significant impact on the community and attracted a proportional amount of public attention. Over the years it was the subject of several feature
stories in the Vacaville Reporter. Though Amistad comprised a small fraction of the religious community in Vacaville, we do have a voice that is heard beyond our numbers. We want people to know there is another kind Christian faith out there, one that is action-oriented, progressive and nonliteral. It matters so much in a community like this that our voice be heard because there is an overwhelming chorus of conservative and fundamentalist voices.

Marian designed Amistad to excel at mission, and this it did in spades. Remarkably, the congregation was able to allocate more than half its revenue to mission projects. In 2007 Amistad was honored with the UCC’s William Sloane Coffin Local Church Award, nationally recognizing the congregation’s efforts for social and environmental justice at both the local and global level. The commendation from the award reads,

Amistad UCC is a house church congregation of some two dozen participants engaged in ministry in Vacaville, California, a community with many dozens of much more conservative Christian congregations. Since its inception seven years ago, Amistad UCC has proudly lived its still speaking, open and affirming, and just peace identity.

Taking its mission statement from the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero, Amistad UCC has faithfully lived its identity by engaging in the following mission activities: Participation in PFLAG and the Solano Pride Center; Rapid Response letters to the editor of the Vacaville newspapers whenever there is a hint of homophobia or “gay-bashing” in print; Visible and UCC identifiable participation in anti-war and peace vigils; Public vigils against capital punishment; Letters to the Editor and “from the pulpit” columns on issues of peace and justice; Active participation in local environmental struggles, particularly the struggle to save Lagoon Valley from subdivision development.

Another of their projects, which they describe as “one of God’s greatest gifts to them,” is their sister church relationship with the Basak United Church of Christ in the Phillipines (UCCP) in Cebu. This year the first Basak UCC scholar, whom Amistad has supported over the years, graduated from Cebu Normal University.

Amistad strives to live up to its name and to embody Jesus’ extravagant welcome and radical hospitality.
Amistad possessed a special capacity to reach people Marian referred to as the “de-churched”—i.e., people who have had a bad experience in church and don’t feel comfortable going back into a traditional church environment. This may be folks who rebelled at the “sin and judgment” fundamentalism of their childhood churches, or gay and lesbian people who no longer feel welcome at their home churches, or people who can no longer reconcile biblical literalism with what they understand about the world and the cosmos. So we get folks who want a spiritual experience, folks who miss Jesus but who want nothing to do with traditional church. People like that feel comfortable in a home setting.

Those are the people who have left Christian churches after a discouraging experience, or after it became irrelevant in their lives, or they felt unwelcome, or they could not reconcile the literal interpretation of Scripture with the experiences of the world they had through science or psychology or with other faith traditions. I think many folks like that have a deep spiritual hunger.

Amistad may help fill that hunger. We are a church that experiences the risen Christ takes the Bible seriously but not literally, that delights in the insights of arts and sciences.

One of the de-churched who found a spiritual home at Amistad eulogized,

I had been raised Catholic, OK, so the thought of a church in a house was very foreign to me. But I thought ‘OK, I’ll give it a go.’ Well, when I got there, I knew immediately, this was it. This was the place where I needed to spend the next stage of my life finding my spiritual personhood, through Marian Conning....

We always had a Friday night meal, and then a communion. And we had discussion around the table. And what was so beautiful about the discussion was that everyone had a right to their opinion, but we did not have a right to be judgmental about anyone else’s opinion. And for me that was such a beautiful thing, because I could hear from this person or that person, who I might not agree with, but it made me understand them more as a person, and where they were coming from, and why. As opposed to saying “This is what you have to believe. This is what you have to do.”

I miss the services of Amistad. I have not found a church that has reached my soul the way Marian’s Amistad reached my soul.

Around that table, faith was deepened, hearts gladdened, lives changed, grace received.

**Mission accomplished**

Through her efforts to give birth to Amistad and rebirth to SBCC, Marian answered her calling to prophetic mission.

We call her mission “prophetic” because it was disturbing. The vision she described, she spoke not because it was what people wanted to hear, but because she perceived it as the truth.

We call her mission “prophetic” because she tried to interpret God’s will for us.

*I seem to have my marching orders. Gather people, break bread, tell stories. Sing songs! I’m an unlikely apostle, am I not? But unlikelier than I have been sent out, and so I go...*

We call her mission “prophetic” because it was risky.

*I’m frightened—yes! even, sometimes, trembling—yes. But I’m counting on water from the Rock along the way. And I’m counting on Bread from heaven too.... and I’m counting on your prayers. May I have them?*
We call her mission “prophetic” because her message could not be fit into existing ideas. Marian defied conventional dichotomies, integrating convictions in ways that others would find paradoxical. For instance, she described her mission as both liberal and evangelical:

*Being liberal means that we see the Bible as a true story, but not factual history. And the evangel, the Gospel, is good news, although I happen to think the Gospel of Jesus Christ is very bad news right off the bat... If you are coming from the world’s perspective, particularly from our own individualistic, materialistic, consumeristic society, it’s very bad news. It says the first shall be last and the last first. It calls for us to give away rather than to acquire. Through conversion, we die to the consumerist values of the world and rise to a new way of looking at things...Once we notice that we’ve got for free an abundance of what people are searching for...it’s hard to find any justification for not trying to tell other people about it.*

**Infirmity and mortality**

Marian experienced illness not as an opportunity for attention, but as a chance to marvel at the miracle of love and rejoice in the experience of trust.

In her middle years, Marian had two encounters with mortality. The second encounter was a bout with cancer in the early 2000s. She responded bravely and resolutely, having the doctors remove even more of her tissue than they had recommended removing. If any part of her body became an obstacle to her mission, she had no use for it. Ever practical, she decisively jettisoned the extra baggage and simply moved on to the next stage of her life.

Her earlier encounter with mortality, in 1996, was more acutely life-threatening. She told the story in a sermon to the SBCC congregation entitled “A Hard Choice”:

*I’m going to talk today about Last Things—about Life and Death, about what is ultimately important. About a hard choice that Paul faced—and about a choice that we face.*
Those of you who are immortal—who don’t know, deep in the core of your being, that someday you will die—you may want to read a book or scribble on the back of the bulletin, because this probably won’t be too interesting to you. Don’t feel badly—I myself was immortal until the age of 54! When I was 54—and a long ways from home, in a little mountain town in Mexico—I had an acute myocardial infarction. A heart attack.

And in so doing, I became mortal.

I’d gone upstairs after dinner, thinking that I had a touch of indigestion. But alone in my room, it hit me—this is not indigestion, it is a heart attack. A big one! I had pain in my chest, I could hardly breathe, I was dizzy—whew. I knew that whatever I was going to do, I was going to have to do it quickly.

It occurred to me that it would be very easy, really, just to lie down on the bed and die. I had no fear of dying—but I did have a big fear of staggering downstairs like a fool and asking for help. (go figure!) What to do?

St. Paul says, “I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better...”

Yes, I can testify to this—that there can come a time when it seems like by far the easiest thing to do is to lie down and die... ...but as I thought about doing that, it was as though there was someone in the room with me—my god-daughter’s son, my grand-godson Christopher, who was 7 at the time—and he was simply calling to me: “Manny, come on! Come here with me!”

And so I knew that Christopher needed me, and that I needed to “remain in the flesh” and so I staggered downstairs, collapsed in front of my hostess—and thanks be to God and to many wonderful doctors and nurses in Mexico, I am here to share the story with you today.

Death was not frightening, but to remain in the flesh was more necessary for those who love me here in this life....

But I’m not immortal anymore! And it’s wonderful...everyone should have a chance to become mortal before they die!

Marian’s contemporaneous description of this episode is strikingly absent of anxiety or self-pity. Instead it evinces a characteristic empathy and solicitude toward her anguished family and a profound gratitude toward her medical caregivers. For example, she wrote of trying to reassure her doctors and nurses:

The most dangerous part of the whole episode was some arrhythmia I had while the clot-buster drug was doing its work. I clearly remember the team of doctors and nurses watching the heart
monitor with concern every time my heart would go boompety-boomp. I said to them softly, “baila mi corazon!”—my heart is dancing!—it seemed a bit wondrous to me. I think I was trying to reassure them.

And she wrote of her gratitude toward them:

_I looked around at the doctors and nurses with tears in my eyes: “Nunca les olvidaré”—“I will never forget you”. They smiled and touched me with so much kindness and concern—I still feel deeply grateful for the time I spent in little Hospital Morelos._

And she wrote of making the very decision to survive out of concern for her grand-godson.

Her description reveals a mind that was fundamentally oriented to the emotional experience of other people:

_Another doctor appeared. (All this in an ER probably no more than 12 ft. square!) A nitroglycerine patch stuck onto my left breast—I carry a scar there still. Demerol and anti-spasmodics in the IV. A nurse hurries in with a packet—precious kabikinase, the “clot busting” drug—with serious urgency it is attached to the IV drip. More EKG’s. Everyone but me is watching the heart monitor…. My chest pain is easing somewhat, and I begin to breathe better, too. What had been a steady pain becomes periodic spasms—labor pains of the heart, with dancing heartbeat in the intervals. “Baila mi corazon!” I remark in wonder—“My heart dances!” The dancing seems to worry Dr. Mendoza, the kind cardiologist—“Tos fuerte!” he commands, “Cough hard!” The cough sets the heart to beating right again. This goes on for a couple of hours—then, abruptly, the pains recede, the mood relaxes, the monitor settles down—and I sleep. I have not felt an iota of fear—just pain, and the dancing heart, and the overwhelming sensation of letting go and placing my life in the hands of these gentle, competent people. And in the hands of God. “All will be well, all will be well.”_
Love never ends

Marian did become well, and lived for 22 more years in good health, save the brief cancer scare. In these precious years Marian achieved some of her greatest triumphs, including launching a nationally honored mission and ministry, enriching the civic and spiritual life of Solano County, spinning a web of fellowship among UCC Bay Association congregations, preserving Lagoon Valley, helping build two houses of worship on Cebu, sponsoring the education of dozens of Filipino children, and helping her husband overcome his own illness. In these golden years Marian also welcomed into the world a small crowd of grandchildren and grand-godchildren.

Marian reached many with the good news of God’s grace, by gathering people in worship and community, by her interfaith work and multicultural ministry, by her social justice advocacy and environmental activism, and by her unconditional love for all of us—whether as mother or godmother, grandmother or aunt, spouse or sister, friend or neighbor, pastor or teacher. Her spirit abides in us always, for love never ends.

*Love—we know, don’t we, that love is bigger than death
and Love, we can take it with us!*

*Truly, living is Christ and dying is gain...*

[“A Hard Choice”, Sermon at SBCC, September 1999]