

## ***Vital churches***

By: Gary Roberts, Conference Associate for Church development and Renewal

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**Redlands UCC** has a story to share about growth in numbers and in spirit. From 2002 to the present, covenanting membership has grown from 80 to 145, with additional participating friends growing from 76 to 128. Weekly worship averages 133, up from 85 in 2002. The congregation's President, Dianne Landeros, attributes the consistent growth to "congruency," that is, elements of worship, leadership, music, art, preaching, building, and programs that came together at the right time. "We are an ONA congregation, welcoming from our founding (35 years ago), with a building designed to reflect our vision statement of being accessible to all. Throughout the facility, and especially in the sanctuary, windows open out onto the world."

Ms. Landeros and Rev. Dr. Sharon R. Graff, the church's Pastor and Teacher since April 2002, agree that Redlands UCC is alert to the needs within the community and attentive to addressing them directly. Both pastor and laity have written letters to the editor, appeared at City Council meetings, and enthusiastically sponsored forums featuring League of Women Voters, prominent speakers, such as Barry Lynn of the **Separation of Church and State**, and films of environmental import. "It is our job," reflects Ms. Landeros, "to invite the community in to see things and to hear people that impact our world. When we hosted **An Inconvenient Truth**, the sanctuary was so full that we had to schedule a second showing. People are hungry for church to be a place where relevant topics are presented and discussed; at the same time, such activities help define our congregation as a place of relevance within the community, the nation, and the world."

Courage, compassion, and grace are favorite words heard often in the church's prophetic and pastoral preaching. And this congregation is willing to translate their faith into political action. Several members are or have been in key leadership positions within city and county structures. Two years ago, the church became a home for a local coalition formed to fight the appearance of a cross on the city's seal, and currently is serving as a meeting place for another interfaith coalition formed for economic justice focused on keeping a Wal-Mart Supercenter out of Redlands. In partnership with other faith communities in Redlands, **RUCC** has given birth to a local ecumenical counseling center, a nationwide food provision program, and a program to assist parolees and their families as they readjust to life outside prison walls.

Affirms both Graff and Landeros, **Redlands UCC** is growing as a result of "us being us with great integrity, and newer members as well as charter members telling their friends that we are all excited about what we are doing and about who we are on the journey of faith. The congregation is dynamic and our members energized by this congruency of values, activities, programs, and people."

*[As I prepared this column, I asked Graf and Landeros, "What can other churches learn from this story?" Rev. Graff's response was, "Know who you are, and then be who you are." Nicely said, Sharon: a clear vision, then living the vision.]*