

# Report of the Nominating Committee

## Nominees Class of 2026



### **Jude Johnson (he/they) — Nominated as Chair**

Jude Johnson is a Member in Discernment and Board-Certified Chaplain, specializing in LGBTQ+ spiritual care. They also serve as Vice Chair for the Southern California Nevada Conference Board of Directors. Jude became a member of Pilgrim UCC in Carlsbad, CA in 2011.

You may know Jude from their work at Pilgrim Pines Camp, guest preaching at various churches around Southern California, or workshops they facilitate for LGBTQ+ allies on gender identity and sexuality.



### **Tim Seery (he/him) — Nominated as Vice Chair**

Rev. Tim Seery serves as pastor of the Congregational Church of La Jolla, UCC and is the current chair of both the Southern Association Church & Ministry Committee and the Conference Minister Search Committee. Ordained in 2017 by the Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference, he received his Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School and is a 2014 graduate of Harvard College where he studied comparative religion. A member of Cohort 11 of the Next Generation

Leadership Initiative, his greatest joy in ministry is being constantly challenged and inspired by colleagues across the denomination. He is currently a doctoral candidate at Pacific School of Religion, studying judicatory ministry and the complexities, realities, and hidden promises of congregationalism and how clergy can be best supported and nurtured in a system of local church autonomy. An advocate for dual-identities and multiple belongings, he is also a candidate for dual ministerial fellowship in the Unitarian Universalist Association and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and the Church of the Larger Fellowship.



### **Chrissy Siva (she/her) — Nominated as Secretary**

Rev. Chrissy Siva is the pastor of the Congregational Church of Fullerton. This part-time call allows her a great balance with parenting three young kids. Chrissy is from Kansas and was raised Lutheran – the kind that don't ordain women. With her obstinate (or determined) personality, this led her to an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies and American Racial and Multicultural Studies. In college, she discovered the UCC and fell in love with its commitment to

equity and justice. She attended Pacific School of Religion and earned dual Master's

Degrees – M.Div. and MA in Biblical Language. She loves looking at the original Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible to enrich our understanding of the text and the ways it speaks to us today. She was called to CCF and ordained in 2015. She has served in various roles with Eastern Association and the Conference since then – including the Search Team for the new Conference Minister, Nominating Committee for the Conference, Committee on Ministry Section B, Annual Gathering Planning Team, and Conference Moderator. Apart from church, her passions include baking, coaching little league, gardening, reading, and crafting.



**Rev. Cynthia “Wally” Hoeger (she/her) – Nominated for Moderator**

Rev. Cynthia “Wally” Hoeger grew up in the SCNC-UCC and has served three churches over her career including First Congregational Church of Los Angeles and Manhattan Beach Community Church. Her longevity and history have been a helpful resource during this time of transition. Wally has worked full-time in children’s and youth ministry for over 15 years and currently serves at First Congregational Church of Long Beach as their Designated Associate Minister. She received her M.Div. from Claremont School of Theology and a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies and Organizational Studies & Leadership from Chapman University. Passionate about supporting and equipping parents to engage in faith practices at home, she lives in Long Beach with her wife Kelly, their baby Laurel, and a menagerie of cats, dogs, and chickens.



**Ashley Hiestand (she/her) – Nominated for Vice Moderator**

Ashley is the joyful pastor of Mount Hollywood UCC. She is also a member of the Next Generation Leadership Initiative (NGLI) a leadership development initiative of the Pension Board for young clergy, and part of the programming committee for Pilgrim Pines. She comes from a line of fierce women — Elika, Rusha, Doris and Laurie, and her favorite hymn is *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. (She will request it if given the opportunity!) Ashley holds an MDiv from Pacific School of Religion and a BA from Occidental College, where she studied Urban and Environmental Policy. Ashley lives in Koreatown with her beloved wife, Kelly, and their cat, Penny.



**Holgje Choi (he/him) – Nominated as a Member of the Board of Directors**

Holgje Choi is currently the pastor at the First Congregational Church of Escondido. He has been serving there for the past seven years. Holgie was born in Seoul, South Korea, and immigrated to the States at the age of one. He was reared in Milford, CT, and received his undergraduate degree in political science from the University

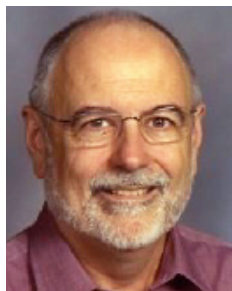
of Connecticut (2002) where he was the recipient of a four-year Full Leadership Scholarship and elected to Phi Beta Kappa, Master of Divinity (2005) from Princeton Theological Seminary, and Master of Theology(2006) from Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. He is currently working on completing his Doctor of Ministry thesis project. His thesis project focuses on studying the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Prior to coming to First Congregational of Escondido, Holgie served as the associate minister for youth and families at the Acton Congregational Church in Acton, MA (2007-2016).

Holgie currently serves as one of the chaplains for the San Diego County Sheriff's Department. He is currently stationed at the North Coastal Station in Encinitas. Holgie enjoys participating in a variety of sports and activities, including Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and powerlifting. He was a bronze medalist at the 2019 National Powerlifting Championship and gold medalist at the 2020 and 2022 National Powerlifting Championship. Most recently, he won the gold medal in his division at the World Jiu-Jitsu League Tournament held in San Diego.



**Robin Heckendorf (she/her) — Nominated as Member of the Board of Directors**

Robin Heckendorf is a member of Westwood Hills Congregational Church in Los Angeles. She lives in Culver City with her husband David, their son Juan Pablo, and blue heeler rescue Luna, who chose Robin when she was volunteering at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Kanab, Utah. She is a graduate of Arizona State University, and following a corporate finance career, Robin has recently retired and looks forward to traveling to Alaska, Canada and beyond. When she is away from home, she particularly enjoys worshiping with other UCC congregations. Robin serves as Treasurer and member of the Preschool Board at Westwood Hills.



**Richard (Rich) Fluechtling (he/him) — Nominated as Member of the Board of Directors**

Rich is a member of Bloom in the Desert Ministries in Palm Springs which he joined when moving to California in 2016. He has served Bloom as treasurer and on various committees. Rich is a lifelong member of the UCC.

Rich has served in elected leadership at the local church, association, conference (SCNC and WI Conf), and national UCC Local Church Ministries and Executive Council spanning the past 34 years. Other service in the UCC has included the board of directors of UCC Cornerstone Fund and Open and Affirming Coalition.

He is a retired chief financial officer in banking. Rich has also served on numerous nonprofit organization boards in his life; frequently in leadership positions. He is an active supporter of performing arts as a singer in chorus and volunteer with other groups. He looks forward to returning to traveling in the near future.



**Rosario Ibarra (she/her) — Nominated as Member of the Board of DirectorsRev**

Rosario Ibarra is a UCC minister with dual standing with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She serves as Building and Capital Services Advisor for Disciples Church Extension Fund. Before becoming a minister, Rosario had a Bachelor’s degree in economics and previously worked in the banking industry. She is bilingual, loves nature, traveling and enjoys learning about other cultures.



**Samuel Pullen (he/him) — Nominated for the Annual Gathering Planning Committee**

Rev. Samuel Pullen was born in Minnesota and grew up in Iowa, where his parents provided an ecumenical Christian upbringing as members of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches. Since his teenage years, Samuel has been putting his faith in action and seeking justice as a student activist, union & community organizer, and a Christian minister.

Pastor Sam brings a variety of gifts to his calling as pastor at Community Congregational United Church of Christ of Los Alamitos. Building community is essential for churches, a skill that Sam has developed while working as a faith-based organizer for Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE) and the PICO National Network (People Improving Communities by Organizing). Progressive evangelism is key to Sam’s vision for ministry, which he practiced while helping to launch (a)Spire ministries at First Congregational Church of Pasadena. Music brings people together and stirs the soul, so don’t be surprised if you see Pastor Sam singing songs or playing guitar or violin during worship. Samuel is fluent in Spanish and plays violin with mariachi groups, where he is commonly known as “El Mariachi Gringo.”

One of the greatest blessings in Samuel’s life is being married to Elizabeth González, who works as a dual language public school teacher. Together they are raising their daughter, Lily, who loves role-playing as a princess in English and Spanish. Rev. Samuel Pullen is engaged in a ministry of transcending borders as a community organizer, musician, and spiritual practitioner.



**Kyle Tade (he/him) — Nominated for the Annual Gathering Planning Committee**

Kyle has been active in the wider UCC since he was a teenager, eventually graduating from Elmhurst University with his B.A. Kyle then went on to earn his MDiv from Duke Divinity School in 2013. After just over 7 years in his first call as an associate pastor at Portage UCC in Michigan, Kyle and his fiancé Ken traded the cold climate of Michigan for the sunshine of California — where Kyle now

serves as Pastor of Los Altos UCC in Long Beach. Over the years Kyle has committed himself to participating in and serving the local and wider churches, he has discovered a place where art and spirituality meet in the practice of painting icons.



**Mitchell Young (he/him) — Nominated for the Nominating Committee**

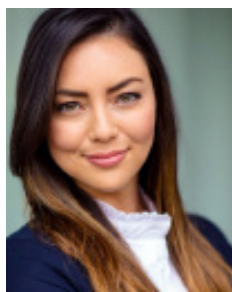
Rev. Mitchell Young, a fourth-generation Chinese American, was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. He claims to be among the first generation of pastors born into the United Church of Christ (UCC) as the UCC. He grew up in the peaceful neighborhood of Kaimuki, East Honolulu, raised in the Kaimuki Evangelical Church, UCC and graduated from Kalani High School in 1979.

He graduated from the University of Hawaii in 1984 (B.A., Drama & Theatre) and from Fuller Theological Seminary (M.Div., Christian Formation and Discipleship) in 1989. Before entering the pastorate, he served a 3-year mission in Thailand through the Presbyterian Church (USA), serving in their Departments of Education and Evangelism.

Rev. Young served his first two pastorates in the Hawaii Conference UCC as associate pastor of The Community Church of Honolulu, UCC (1994-1996) and then as pastor of Hanapepe UCC (1997-2005), during which time he was ordained in the Kauai Association UCC in 1998, married Nitaya Luckanavonaporn of Chiangmai, Thailand in 2001 and together welcomed the birth of their daughter Natasha in 2003.

Since 2005, Rev. Young has been serving as senior pastor of Montebello Plymouth Congregational Church, an historically Japanese American, now multiracial, multicultural UCC church in Montebello, California.

Young's other training and experience includes Clinical Pastoral Education, Interim Ministry Network training, hospital and police chaplaincy. He has coordinated several multi-church pulpit exchanges on Kauai and in Los Angeles. One of his passions is for multicultural and multilingual diversity and has helped express "God is still speaking," and "A Just World for All" in a variety of languages spoken in the UCC. He is also an active member of the Pacific Islander and Asian American Ministries (PAAM) and has served as editor of PAAM Sunday liturgy for several years. Rev. Young and spouse Nitaya also enjoy crafting multicultural clerical stoles.



**Jennifer Strickland (she/her) — Nominated for the Nominating Committee**

The Rev. Dr. Jennifer Strickland co-pastors Claremont United Church of Christ with her husband Jacob Buchholz. Jennifer received her MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary and her Doctor of Ministry from Duke University.

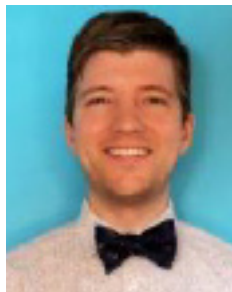
She has dual standing in the United Church of Christ and Presbyterian (USA) denominations and has served churches in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, and Nebraska. She is a member of the leadership team of Raising Kids for Good, a non-profit that curates resources for progressive Christian churches and families. Last year Rev. Strickland founded This Little Light Ministries, through which she writes creative Vacation Bible School curricula and worship liturgy.



**Ben Bond (he/they) — Nominated for the Conference Accessibility Team**

Rev. Ben Bond grew up in the First Congregational Church of Long Beach (UCC). Ben is the Faith Inclusion and Belonging Associate at the national disability justice non-profit Respectability where his work centers on disability and multifaith inclusion. He is happy to lend his knowledge and skills to advance accessibility in the UCC. Ben has earned their Master of Divinity Degree from Yale Divinity

School along with a certificate from the Institute of Sacred Music and the Arts at Yale. An alumnus of Chapman University, he earned his Bachelor's degree there in Religious studies.



**Jacob Buchholz (he/him) — Nominated for the Conference Accessibility Team**

Rev. Dr. Jacob Buchholz is Senior Co-Pastor of Claremont United Church of Christ with his spouse, Rev. Dr. Jennifer Strickland.

Jacob received his Bachelors in the Comparative Study of Religion at Harvard University, his Masters of Divinity at Princeton Theological Seminary where he and Jen were classmates, and his Doctor of Divinity in Christian Leadership at Duke Divinity School.

Jacob grew up in a Deaf family where Deafness was celebrated as entry into a unique cultural and linguistic community. His mother was the pastor of a Deaf church and during seminary, he started a Deaf church conducted entirely in American Sign Language. His family's cultural heritage inspired his passion for greater access in worship communities. After serving two different churches in Lincoln, NE, Jen and Jacob received their call to Claremont in 2016.

Jen and Jacob are passionate vegetarians and were married in Budir, Iceland in May 2014. If you ask them, "Why Iceland?" they will likely respond, "Why not?" They have three beloved rescue dogs, and two rescue potbelly pigs. In 2022, they welcomed their precious human daughter, Clementine Jubilee Strickland.