

DRE Annual Report 2020
Submitted by Bethany Vaccaro

Dear UUCSC Community,

It goes without saying that this year has been unlike anything we've ever experienced. In many ways, it has shown us the incredible value of the community we create at UUCSC, as even during a time of isolation and the incredible action of having to close our physical doors, we can more clearly see why and how our values are so important.

Before our physical closing in March 2020, due to the global virus pandemic, we were enjoying a year of much growth and some vital shifts in how we deliver our RE program. Our weekly attendance rate has never been higher in the last three years. On average, we served 18 kids each Sunday (our highest attendance was 29!).

We currently have 28 kids registered for our main classroom (K-4th grade), 6 registered for our junior youth group (5th-7th grade), and 11 kids registered for our Nursery (total enrollment = 45). We have no senior youth officially registered, but there are 3 who remain associated with the congregation and occasionally join in the main RE classroom or Nursery as volunteers.

We had 9 volunteers help us out over the course of the year, as well as extra special guests who came to share amazing experiences with us such as a gong bath, old time music and circle dancing, and theater improv.

Here's a snapshot of some of our significant developments:

Shifting to a DRE-led main classroom:

In the past, we have staffed the main classroom with volunteers, looking for 2-3 congregants to run the main classroom. This year, we shifted to the DRE being the lead teacher, with 1-2 congregants as assistants. This alleviated the need to find 3-4 volunteers for each morning (depending on if it was a youth group week or not). Rather, I was able to run the program with 1-2 volunteers, as well as ample parent support in the classroom (another growing trend is parents attending RE with their children for a variety of reasons. I view this as a positive addition to the program). It also maximizes my skills as a facilitator and provides consistency week-to-week for the kids. For the one DRE day off a month, we trained our Nursery Lead (at the time, Lee Cowan, the next DRE!) to run the RE classroom once a month (as it is easier to staff the Nursery with a volunteer than the main classroom).

This system boded extremely well for smoothing out the difficulties I've experienced with adequately staffing the program with volunteers. I also enjoyed stepping into this role to truly ensure content delivery happened in the way we've been trying to shift to, which is much less formal than the lesson plans of the past. I truly feel my time as DRE was better spent leading the group rather than roaming the halls as the "floater" checking on each classroom and

providing supplementary support. As we've had one main RE classroom for about the last year and a half, I've seen that it's a lot to ask a volunteer to pilot a group of up to 20 youngsters. The DRE is the one with the skills and training to do this, so it would make sense to me if this model were to continue.

The use of Soul Matters and theme-based curriculum, rather than extensive lesson plans.

We've already covered the shift to play-based learning over the last year and a half, and it's my pleasure to report that the church-wide use of Soul Matters continues to be an incredible support in constructing our program this way. The RE curriculum provides a variety of options for how to present and explore content. We chose to take the central theme for each day and use the Wonder Box with one simple object in it that displayed something about the theme. Sometimes this was as formal as it got, and sometimes this allowed for a deeper focus when appropriate and when the group was receptive.

Roses, Buds, and Thorns

We've always begun our time in RE with a chalice lighting and Joys and Concerns. This year, with the input of the kids themselves, we changed the language to sharing our "roses, buds, and thorns." I noticed that engagement immediately picked up, both in the frequency of kids sharing things about their lives, and also the depth of what they shared. It apparently is a lot easier to share a "thorn" than a "concern." This time has gotten to be quite special, and I advocate for continuing to put the focus on Roses, Buds, and Thorns as the primary "work" for our brief time together, followed by thematically-inspired art, outside play, and group games. If this is the primary thing we are asking kids to sit still for, and it's something that keeps them engaged, I see that as an incredibly positive development for the program. It has been a delight to me that since our physical shutdown, a virtual session of Roses, Buds, and Thorns (followed by a parent check-in), led by Rev. DL due to constraints in my own personal situation, has been going strong.

It has been a delight to serve in the capacity of DRE, and although the ending of this year has been very different than how I imagined it, I see nothing but marvelous things ahead for the RE program and the church as a whole, made stronger and knit closer by this strange turn of events. Many blessings to all!