



CONFRONTING HISTORY TO HEAL: A CHURCH'S PATH FROM TRUTH TO RECONCILIATION

“A better world through our daily actions” is covenant of Pasadena religious institution, as embodied in atoning for past leader’s sins

PUBLIC DEDICATION: 11 a.m. Sunday, March 29, 2026

March 19, 2026

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PASADENA, Calif. – The pursuit of social justice is a top priority at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church. But what happens when that quest to uncover and undo violations of human rights leads right back to your door?

At Neighborhood, they didn’t flinch. The church is now making amends and educating the public about a dark chapter in its 141-year history: the legacy of former board member Robert Millikan, a Nobel laureate and Caltech chairman who also was a prominent advocate for the white supremacist and eugenicist policies that led California to forcibly sterilize 20,000 marginalized people.

To redress Millikan’s wrongs and memorialize the victims, the church will dedicate a new work of public art on Sunday, March 29 at 11 a.m.

“As Unitarian Universalists,” said Neighborhood’s Senior Minister, Dr. Rev. Omega Burckhardt, “we are committed to the spiritual work of justice and equity based in love. This means we must be accountable to our own problematic history. We must start here if we have any hope of justice and the Beloved Community beyond.”

This art and public education campaign are the result of years of work by Neighborhood’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which formed in 2018. It follows earlier action by the church’s Racial Justice and Equity Committee, which removed Millikan’s name from a place of honor on its grounds in 2017 – formally revoking the celebration of his legacy

within three months of his history being brought to light. The process culminated with the renaming of the space as the Remembrance and Renewal Room – and this is where the art, titled *Free them all*, is displayed.

That act ended a long association. Millikan worshiped at the church from 1925 until his death in 1953, serving on its board for more than half that time. His wife led the Women's Guild, and his son headed the church's Boy Scout troop. The decision to confront his legacy therefore represents a deep, institutional reckoning – turning a commitment to justice inward in order to heal and move forward.

Said Donna Perkins, founder and chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, drawing on her experience as an Occupational Therapist: “We have used our church services to create a safe and sacred space for learning, reflecting and collectively healing. We are also attempting to model that the same process of collective healing can be used in our personal lives to repair relationships.”



Photo of the backside of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church's House. This is the building that has the dining room where the art piece is installed.

Photo Credit: El Moss



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MILLIKAN'S COMPLICATED LEGACY LEADS TO RENEWED FOCUS ON RECONCILIATION

*Physicist won Nobel Prize, ran Caltech, advocated for forced
sterilizations of “inferior” women and men*

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PASADENA, Calif. – Robert Millikan was a towering intellect and pillar of his community, which made his embrace of white supremacy and eugenics all the more sinister.

Until Millikan's death in 1953 at age 85, he was a member of Pasadena's Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church, even serving on its board for 15 years. The respectability bestowed upon him by his worship at this institution, not to mention his Nobel Prize (Physics, 1923), and decades of service as chairman of both Caltech and the Huntington Library, granted Millikan legitimacy for promoting horrific policies that led to government-sponsored involuntary sterilization of 20,000 marginalized women and men in California.

Because Millikan was a prominent member of the Pasadena community and active at the church of the past, Neighborhood's current membership and Senior Minister Rev. Dr. Omega S. Burckhardt underscore the importance today of reconciliation, remembrance, and renewed dedication to righting the moral wrongs of their history.

“It's imperative that we grapple with the harm Millikan's (eugenics) research caused throughout the 20th century,” Burckhardt said. “We must address this misuse of power... so that we can move with more resilience, care, and health into a future where eugenics and unjust harmful medical treatment based on race or socioeconomic status has no place.”

At 11 a.m. Sunday, March 29, Millikan's legacy will be directly addressed at his former house of worship with the dedication of *Free them all*, a memorial created by the congregation and artist Jasmine Baetz for the victims of the policies he championed.

Millikan's ties to Neighborhood were strong. His wife led the Women's Guild, and his son headed the church's Boy Scout troop, making Neighborhood's confrontation with his harmful advocacy a profound reckoning with its own past. He was held in such esteem that a multipurpose room in the church's office was dedicated in his name.

But it was during Millikan's time as a member of Neighborhood, if not during his tenure on the board, that he served as an initial trustee of the Pasadena-based Human Betterment Foundation (HBF), a pro-eugenics organization. The HBF lobbied for legislation across the United States that would enact compulsory sterilization of women and men whose genetics were deemed by their so-called betters as undesirable.

The state of California wholeheartedly embraced eugenics policies, as under laws that ran 70 years until 1979, forced and coerced sterilizations here accounted for one-third of those carried out across America.

Even worse, the HBF provided a conscious model for the persecution, dehumanization, forced sterilization, and, ultimately, murders by the Nazis during the 1930s and World War II. Millikan never publicly denounced his membership in the Foundation.

Demonstrating how eugenics was touted by top civic leaders of the day, joining Millikan in his work to establish the HBF were five other men with Caltech ties as well as the president of the University of Southern California. In recent years, all have had their names removed from buildings on their respective campuses.

In 2017, Neighborhood renamed the space dedicated to Millikan, calling it the Remembrance and Renewal Room, and it is where *Free them all* is located.



Robert Millikan (1868-1953) was a Nobel laureate, Caltech chairman, and lay leader in the Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church – as well as an avowed eugenicist and white supremacist. PHOTO CREDIT: Nobel Foundation



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HISTORIC PASADENA CHURCH MAKING AMENDS FOR PAST LEADER'S EUGENICS ADVOCACY

*Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist dedicates art memorializing
California's 20,000 victims of forced sterilizations, a policy
championed by past church board member Robert Millikan*

MEDIA PREVIEW: 10 a.m. Thur., March 26, 2026

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March 19, 2026

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PASADENA, Calif. – In an act of historical accountability, Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church will dedicate a collaborative public art memorial on Sunday, March 29 to the thousands of Californians subjected to state-sponsored forced sterilizations last century. The church is confronting this legacy in part because one of its former leaders, Robert Millikan, was a prominent advocate of the eugenics policies that enabled these abuses.

Millikan, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and longtime chairman of Caltech, was a member of Neighborhood UU Church from 1925 until his death in 1953, serving on its board for more than half that time. He was also a prominent advocate of white supremacy and eugenics – beliefs enacted in the involuntary sterilization of racial minorities, the disabled, the poor, the incarcerated, and those deemed “sexual deviants.”

Policies touted by Millikan and others led to the sterilization of more than 20,000 people under California law from 1909-1979, and in the state's women's prisons well into this century. California's eugenics sterilizations account for one-third of those carried out across America.

The memorial dedication ceremony will take place at 11 a.m. on March 29 at the church, located at 301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. in Pasadena. A media preview, featuring the artwork and

interview opportunities with Senior Minister Rev. Dr. Omega Burckhardt, artist Jasmine Baetz, and Truth and Reconciliation chair Donna Perkins will be held on Thursday, March 26 at 10 a.m.

“The public unveiling of this art project, as well as the reception and community gathering time, reflects our desire for our process of reconciliation to be part of a community-wide process of acknowledgment and reckoning with historical oppression,” said Rev. Burckhardt. “We hope, as a faith community, to show that this work pertains to all of us.

“We hope others will join us in liberatory work that blends art and education through which we can build a more just and loving world.”

The memorial, titled *Free them all*, is a collaborative installation. Its central components are hundreds of unique, hand-sculpted clay “interior fist” forms, created by congregation members during a 2025 workshop to express collective pain, anger, and remembrance. These forms are presented on reclaimed wooden boards – witnesses to institutional history sourced from tables near a university laboratory once named for Millikan – and within a stainless-steel container, representing solidarity across time.

The work was created by Jasmine Baetz, an artist and educator whose practice uses deep research and community collaboration to help communities confront difficult histories. Baetz also will be speaking during the church service immediately preceding the memorial ceremony. The service starts at 10 a.m. and [is streamed via YouTube](#).

This act of accountability addresses a deep institutional legacy. Millikan was not merely a man of immense scientific prestige and community respect, but an embedded leader at Neighborhood, serving on its board for 15 years.

The memorial is the culmination of a years-long process led by the church’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), formed in 2018. This follows earlier action by the Racial Justice and Equity Committee, which removed Millikan’s name from a multipurpose room in 2017. The TRC has since guided the congregation through study, reflection, and the renaming of that same space as the Remembrance and Renewal Room, where the memorial now resides.

The church’s memorial aligns with California’s recent efforts to redress these historical crimes. Legislation passed in 2021 allocated \$7.5 million to provide reparations to survivors. California is the third state to compensate survivors of its eugenics laws, and the first to include those sterilized in state prisons after 1979. An estimated 600 survivors from the earlier period are believed to be alive.

A 2013 state audit revealed at least 144 women were illegally sterilized in California prisons between 2006 and 2010, with evidence of cases stretching back decades.

Against this backdrop of historical and recent harm, the memorial stands as a permanent witness and a call for justice.

Said Donna Perkins, founder and chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee: “We have also attempted to center the survivors of harm in the creation of our new art installation. There are physical, psychological and spiritual strategies to accept uncomfortable truths and grow from the process.”



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PASADENA CHURCH'S MEMORIAL FORGED FROM COLLECTIVE GESTURE AND SILENT WITNESS

The artwork Free them all transforms hand-sculpted clay and reclaimed wood into a permanent testament to victims of eugenics

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PASADENA, Calif. – How does an artist memorialize the victims of state-sponsored eugenics? For Jasmine Baetz, commissioned by a church confronting its past, the answer lies in capturing two core human responses: pain and anger.

The resulting installation, *Free them all*, is not a static monument at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church, but a physical archive of communal gesture and historical witness. The work will be dedicated to the public in a ceremony at the church on Sunday, March 29, 2026, at 11 a.m.

Installed in the Neighborhood Church's Remembrance and Renewal Room – the space formerly named for eugenicist Robert Millikan, a Nobel laureate who was a longtime board member there – the artwork transforms its environment.

The work's core elements are hundreds of "interior fist" forms, created during a 2025 workshop where Neighborhood congregation members held clay in their hands then made fists.

"We had this repeated action of putting the clay in our palms, squeezing it, and then releasing it," Baetz explained. "That resulting form is this sort of expression of pain or power or rage. It's a relational way of being and knowing this history."

Each piece is as unique as a fingerprint, a tactile record of individual participants within a collective act of remembrance.

These forms are presented in two profound ways. Some are in a stainless-steel container, a “gathering... reflecting the collectivity and connection of anti-eugenic solidarity across space and time,” Baetz said. Others are screwed to wooden boards that are central to the work’s concept of material witness. Baetz sourced this wood from old tables that once sat directly across from the former Millikan Laboratory at the Claremont Colleges.

“I was trying to bring in this idea of material being a witness,” Baetz said. “These tables would have been a witness to the changing of the Millikan name across the street.”

Even Baetz’s choice of hardware became a deliberate aesthetic and ethical decision. Initially using identical screws, she recoiled from the “militaristic repetition.” She instead used a variety of screws from old projects, finding that “small, formal decisions can... betray values.”

The title, *Free them all*, extends the memorial’s scope, invoking both prison abolition activism and Jess Whatcott’s scholarship about carceral eugenics. Whatcott demonstrates the continuities from the systems of institutionalization and forced sterilization in the early 20th century to today’s migrant detention centers and other forms of incarceration. The installation, built from clay, reclaimed wood, and communal effort, stands as a permanent site for remembrance and a catalyst for ongoing dialogue.



The art installation, *Free them all*, is displayed at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, Calif. PHOTO CREDIT: JOSEPH FRIGAULT



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CONFRONTING A CHURCH'S TROUBLED HISTORY WITH CLAY AND CONSCIENCE

*Artist Jasmine Baetz turns research into reparative art, sculpting
memorials that help communities reckon with difficult truths*

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PASADENA, Calif. – For artist and educator Jasmine Baetz, clay is more than a medium – it is a conduit for historical memory, a tool for civic dialogue, and a means for a Pasadena church to make abstract injustice palpably real.

Her practice, grounded in a ceramics MFA and honed through teaching at institutions like Scripps College, is characterized by deep research and collaborative action.

“Whenever I’m working on some kind of advocacy project, I try to learn about the precedents in whatever place I’m at,” Baetz said. This methodology leads her to art that doesn’t just comment on history but actively participates in its reinterpretation.

Baetz’s path to creating the memorial *Free them all* for Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church was paved by prior encounters with suppressed histories and institutional resistance. While teaching at Scripps, she participated in a multi-year effort to remove a sculpture by Georg Kolbe, who made eugenic art for the Third Reich – a shockingly difficult process that required bringing in Wolfgang Brauneis, an expert on the artists of National Socialism in Germany.

“I thought everyone wants to punch a Nazi, so I thought it’d be super easy,” Baetz wryly recalled. “But it was not easy.”

This experience exposed Baetz to how art from oppressive regimes can be “whitewashed and sanitized” over time – a lesson that directly informs her sensitivity to the symbols and spaces she engages with.

Her research on eugenics emerged from this nexus of art, history, and power. In 2020, whistleblowing reports of forced sterilizations in ICE detention centers marked a turning point, making a historical evil terrifyingly contemporary.

“You start to hear how so much of what is said in public discourse is laced with eugenic rhetoric,” Baetz said, calling it a “horrible research interest” that is nonetheless essential. This drives her desire to channel her practice toward remembrance and repair.

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what we can do with art,” Baetz said, seeking to counter the legacy of fascist art with work fostering collective processing while also demonstrating that accountability can be material, collaborative, and, ultimately, transformative.

Through *Free them all*, Baetz continues her commitment to what she terms “reparative work,” helping institutions confront their pasts not with shame, but with purposeful, creative action. The work’s dedication ceremony will be held on the church on Sunday, March 29, 2026, at 11 a.m.



CAPTION: Jasmine Baetz works on her art installation *Free them all*, which is displayed at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, Calif.

PHOTO CREDIT: JOSEPH FRIGAULT