

THE VISITOR

The Congregational Church of Austin United Church of Christ

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Rev. Thomas J. VandeStadt

“It is not some meditative communion with God that I crave. What one wants during extreme crisis is not connection with God, but connection with people; not supernatural love, but human love. No, that is not quite right. What one craves is supernatural love, but one finds it only within human love. This is why I am, such as I am, a Christian, because I can feel God only through physical existence, can feel his love only in the love of other people.”

—Christian Wieman, *My Bright Abyss*



During the season of Lent, Cecile Adam, Jo Jensen, and Tom VandeStadt will lead a series of reflections inspired by the book, *My Bright Abyss*, by Christian Wieman. The series will not be a book review in which we read the book cover to cover as a group and critique what we like or don't like about it. Rather, Cecile, Jo, and Tom will lift out some quotes, like the one above, and use them as a basis for reflection.

For example, how do *you* experience God's love in your life? Aside from being taught that God loves you, or having faith that God loves you, how do you tangibly *experience* God's love in your life? Or to back up and not be presumptuous—*do you* experience God's love in your life? You may or may not. If so, is it through the love of other people? What is the relationship between God's love and human love? Is this the only way you experience God's love, or are there other ways? Finally, what is love?

Wieman—a poet who has been diagnosed with cancer, a man who has suffered intense physical pain and faced the stark reality of his own death, a husband and a father of two young daughters—wrestles throughout his book with a number of questions. Who is God, where is God, and how can I know God? Who is Christ, where is Christ, and how can I know Christ? Does my life, my suffering, and my death have meaning? Can I have faith that they ultimately do have meaning, even if I myself cannot discern any meaning in them? What kind of language can I use to speak of God? How can I translate powerful spiritual experiences into my mundane everyday life? What will happen when I die, to me and those I leave behind?

Sometimes, Wieman poses some rather clear answers to his questions. Just as often, his answers aren't so clear, to either himself or the reader. And as he continuously reflects on his unfolding life—his experience of love and suffering, his belief and unbelief—he sometimes contradicts something he wrote earlier, and confesses doing so. His book is testimony to the fact that life is not tidy. No answer is final. Our faith and beliefs are contingent on so many things in this world, and this world and our experience of it are constantly changing. God, Christ, and ultimate meaning cannot be pinned down.

Church Announcements

Lent is that time of the church's liturgical year that we set aside for deeper reflection on our life, our faith, and our relationship with God and the rest of God's creation. Wieman's book provokes us to reflect not only deeply, but honestly, on what we really do believe and don't believe, on what life means to us and what we mean to life. Life is too precious, astonishing, and complex to just accept the standard answers to the most pressing questions without subjecting them to the fire of our own experience, or to just skim along the surface without feeling intensely the deep joy and pain of what it means to be a human on this earth, a human in need of meaning.

Please join us during the season of Lent. If you feel moved, read Wieman's book. However, you don't need to read it to participate in this series of reflections. Short excerpts of the book, along with reflection questions, will be handed out to everyone who participates.

Some Christian Education Opportunities Over the Horizon

We have some interesting, and hopefully, inspiring Christian Education opportunities coming up after the New Year.

In the season of Epiphany, **Rev. Dr. Van Herd** will lead a reading and reflection of the book, *Honest to Genesis, a Biblical and Scientific Challenge to Creationism*, by Dr. Margaret Gray Towne. Dr. Towne says of her book: "My book is written for everyone...theologians and pastors who are not as trained in science, and scientists who have not been trained in biblical hermeneutics. I have tried to make these subjects understandable to everyone."

In the Season of Lent, Rev. Dr. Jo Jensen, Rev. Cecile Adam, and Rev. Tom VandeStadt will lead a series of reflections on where and how we experience (or don't experience) God in our everyday lives, based on the book, *My Bright Abyss*, by poet Christian Wiman. The series will not be a book discussion in which we critique the book. Rather, Jo, Cecile, and Tom will lift themes from the book for deeper reflection and discussion.

Please help us serve **hot meals to the homeless** over the winter months. The **Homeless Ministry Team** is once again seeking contributions of **frozen meals** that can be reheated for serving at either **Front Porch Lunch or the Freeze Night Shelter**. Prepared meals should serve about 25 hungry people, and anything that freezes and reheats will work great – casseroles, pasta dishes, chili, etc. Please place your dishes in disposable roasting tins, cover with foil, freeze and tape a note to it indicating your name, the dish, and any reheating instructions. Then bring it to church either on Sunday or during office hours to be placed in one of the downstairs freezers. Contact **John Goff** (goff@ig.utexas.edu) with any questions. Thanks!

Church Leadership

Trustee Co-Chairs	Don Brown & Bill Campbell
Deacons Chair	Janet Parsons
Outreach Team	Reuel Nash & John Goff
Moderator Co-Chairs	Barbara Burnham & Bill Beardall
Treasurer	Gail Christeson
Financial Secretary	Pam Tucker
Christian Education	Rachel Dietz
Coordinators	John Burlinson
Clerk	Betty Bodman
Historians	Pat & Mel Oakes
Webmistress	Sara Ross
Member-At-Large	Bill Beardall

Personals

by Pat Oakes



11/15 Liz, Annie, Becky and Reuel Nash in Steamboat Springs--photo by Ellie

The **Nashes** gathered in **Steamboat Springs, CO**, for a week of fun, food, work, and celebration. **Annie** lives there and is a ski slope photographer. **Becky** returned from a semester in **Costa Rica** and will be in Austin until she goes to **Brooklyn, NY**, for the Spring semester. **Ellie** was in Austin for a very short visit before the Colorado trip, then she returned to Montreal to celebrate Christmas with her future in -laws.



Allison Goodgame took this photo of Savanna, Pam, and Harrison Tucker over Thanksgiving while in Costa Rica

The **Tucker/Goodgame** family traveled to **Costa Rica** over the week of Thanksgiving. The trip was scheduled (and paid for) just before Pam's breast cancer diagnosis, so being able to make the trip was a wonderful goal to be able to meet. It was a great time with lots of adventure: climbing and rappelling an ancient tree, hiking in the jungle, hiking near a volcano, floating a river, and seeing monkeys, sloths,

crocodiles, giant lizards and beautiful birds, going white water rafting, soaking in hot springs, and flying on zip lines. They were a little disappointed with the "beach" part of the trip with "No Nadar" and "Corrientes Peligrosas" (No swimming; dangerous currents) signs posted.

Mel Oakes and **Kathleen Strong** enjoyed watching the **UT Women's basketball** team take on Mississippi State. The **Longhorns** won 53-47 in a competitive match between 2 ranked teams. Mel used to be on the **Women's Athletics Council** and has watched a lot of UT women's basketball games over the years. Kathleen has been a season ticket holder for over 20 years. Their moments of glory were when they were "guest coaches" and got to sit right behind the team.



12/15 Beth Gleason gave herself a great Christmas present--motorcycle lessons with 7 great-looking guys!!

Beth Gleason treated herself to a special Christmas present. She gave herself motorcycle lessons. One wonders if her dog **Flower** is going to ride in a side car with her!

Stephen Russell has completed his first semester at UT in his capacity as the **Priscilla Pond Flawn Professor** in **Child Development** in the **Department of Human Development and Family Sciences**. He spent the winter break in **Tucson** with his spouse, **Scott Neeley**, and their son, **Ryan**.



11/15 Jaime Hadley with a whole passel of relatives in Michigan for Thanksgiving

Jaime Hadley had a very busy November. He traveled to **Germany** for the birthday party of a friend who lived there. He spent four days in **Schwäbisch Hall**, one day in **Zwiesel**, and three days in **Prague, Czech Republic**. **Schwäbisch Hall** is a small out of the way town between **Stuttgart** and **Nuremberg** that is probably rarely visited by Americans, but it was every bit as lovely and quaint as the more popular **Heidelberg**, which he visited several years ago. Jaime recommends the complimentary breakfast buffet at the **Ringhotel Hohenlohe** there, and you must try the salt lozenges, as this town was a center of medieval salt production. According to Jaime's German friend, in almost any town in Germany, you would know you are in one of the more exclusive neighborhoods if all the streets around you are named after classical music composers - who knew!? **Zwiesel** is to be visited if you are a fan of **Bavaria**. There are shops along the main street selling dirndls and lederhosen, and it is part of the region of Bohemian glass production. Jaime describes **Prague** like a corner of **Disneyland**. Clean, full of people, full of castles and churches from many hundreds of years ago, interesting architecture to be seen all along the quaint streets between major attractions, and filled with bars, coffee houses, restaurants and souvenir shops so that there is never a block without something to see, smell, hear or taste. He found the lauded astronomical clock to be a bit of a let-down, only because he was giant sound from an enormous carillon, but alas the bells for the clock were less grand than in his imagination. Everything

else in the city exceeded expectations, from the hundreds of white swans floating on the river, to the 300 steps up the observation tower on the tallest hill (even if the tram up the hill was out of order and was replaced by quite a hike), to the amazing food, and, of course, beer. To explore further, ask Jaime about midnight party snacks of meatloaf, dinner in an ancient cellar accompanied by medieval musicians and belly dancers, or a bit of wood that turned out to be the hugest stick insect he had ever seen! Then over **Thanksgiving**, Jaime joined his family in the **Lansing, Michigan**, area for a family Thanksgiving, and for a memorial service and burial of his grandmother, **Carol Jean Kanouse Hadley** (10/27/1922 - 9/23/2015). Jaime's dad grew up in **Shaftsbury, Michigan**, a 1 stop-sign town just east of Lansing, where Jaime's grandmother was Postmaster until she retired. Jaime's father lives here in Austin and his siblings in **Dallas, Antlers, OK**, and **Charlotte, MI**, and this is the first time in 40+ years they were all four together in the town where they grew up, and the first time in 30+ years that Jaime can remember being in a room anywhere with cousins from all 4 families. Jaime took advantage of the time to catch up with the cousins, and spend time looking through old photos with more distant cousins who share an interest in genealogy. He also had time to uphold a long family tradition of taking a trip to **Frankenmuth, MI**, with family to visit **World Famous Zehnder's Restaurant** for a family-style chicken dinner and **Bronner's Christmas Wonderland** for some ornament shopping.

It's not unusual for **Olivia Vaché** and **Matthew Greene**, her boyfriend of four years, to surprise each other with weekend get-aways, especially in November, the anniversary of their first meeting. So Olivia was fairly matter-of-fact when Matthew told her she would need to leave work early one Friday and would have to ask for Monday off. When he picked her up at work on



11/15 Olivia Vaché with her fiancé Matthew Greene in Reykjavik, Iceland

Friday she was a bit surprised that instead of heading north out of Boston they were headed to the airport, and she was quite surprised to find herself in the international airport. Fortunately, Matthew had packed all her warm gear (and her passport) for a trip to **Reykjavik, Iceland!** Shortly after arriving they visited the church where they had seen the Aurora Borealis last winter, and Matthew knelt down to propose. Only shock caused her to pause for a few seconds before saying yes. They don't have a date or place yet (first they have to get through the bar exams in July, then think about it), but they enjoyed their first engagement party in **Orlando** with his family and Florida friends over the Thanksgiving weekend.



12/20/15 Mary Towery Masters and Sara Ross at the church Christmas party after the candlelight service.

Pat and Mel Oakes have enjoyed hosting an open house at their home after the candlelight service each year since **1972**--only missing one year as far as they can remember--Dec. 2000 when their first grandchild, **Emily**, was born. Unfortunately, Pat's back has been giving her fits, so it was decided they would have to cancel. **The Deacons** with **Jaime Hadley** coordinating, not to be undone, rallied the congregation and, with the help of so many people, put on a wonderful party. The sanctuary was aglow with candles and the Fellowship Hall was beautifully decorated. The several tables were filled with all kinds of Christmas treats--and Jaime even made eggnog. It was a joy to see **Ches** and **Maggie Towery** there with their daughter **Crystal**, and **Mary (Towery)** and **Danny Masters** in the congregation. **Alex VandeStadt** was home from **San Antonio** where she has been thriving doing her student teaching. Another special guest was **Thaisa Howorth**, who was our child-care-giver for several years who has been teaching English in **South Korea**. She was back in Austin trying very hard to decide whether or not to go back to South Korea to her job there, or to stay in Austin with her family and find a job here. There will be an update next month.



12/20/15 Thaisa Howorth, home from Korea, enjoyed visiting with folks at the party after the candlelight service. Kristen Parkhill and Caleb were especially delighted to see her

Heart of Texas Association News

January

by Liz Nash

We have an opportunity to share in a joyous celebration with Friedens UCC in Geronimo. On Saturday, January 9th at 11 am, all of our Association churches are invited to a Service of Installation for Reverends Sonja and Dave Phillips, co-pastors of Friedens Church. As in ordinations, the Association installs our ministers, and we are hoping that many of us can turn out to support Dave, Sonja, and Friedens Church. Rev. Dr. Ginny Brown-Daniel, Conference Minister of the Missouri Mid-South Conference of the UCC, former pastor of Plymouth UCC in Spring, and friend to many of us, will be preaching. The worship service will be followed by a barbeque lunch. Sonja and Dave came to Friedens last year from the Florida Conference of the UCC. Let's give them a great welcome on January 9th.

The South Central Conference Clergy Retreat is coming up on Tuesday, March 1st through Wednesday, March 2nd at Slumber Falls Camp. This year, Rev. Dr. Ken Crawford will be leading. Ken is a ministry leadership and life coach, spiritual director, and the pastor of St. Paul's UCC in Dallas. The retreat is open to ordained and licensed ministers. It is always a great time for fellowship with colleagues, mutual support, and renewal. I encourage our ministers to come and hope each of our churches will support and encourage your ministers to be part of this retreat. Registration information will be forthcoming in the South Central Conference e-news.

The UCC National Youth Event, a terrific opportunity for all of our Heart of Texas youth ages 13-18, is coming on July 26th-30th at Disney World's Coronado Springs Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Florida. I have gone with our youth to the last two NYEs, and I can say from experience that this is an unforgettable gift of faith building, connection to the church, and fellowship, filled with worship, workshops, and outstanding speakers. We have sent a large number of

youth before, and the Heart of Texas Association has set aside a substantial amount of money to support them. This year, we join with our brothers and sisters in the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ for an even wider experience of church. Registration is from January 20th through May 27th, with a cost of \$549 (double occupancy including admission to Disney World resorts). Families are also invited, although there will be parts of the event limited to youth and chaperones only. We are hoping to be able to cover all or most of the transportation costs through our scholarships with additional help from the South Central Conference. The theme, *Believe*, based on Hebrews 11:1, is an invitation to "our amazing still speaking youth to believe in themselves as leaders of faith sharing in the infinite work of our Lord in a diverse world calling each of us to serve." Can't get better than that! For more information, go to <http://nye.uccpages.org/>. We are working on travel plans and will send out travel information as soon as possible. Contact me at lizknash@gmail.com with questions.

Finally, looking ahead, the Heart of Texas Association spring meeting will be on Sunday afternoon, April 3rd, at Hope United in Georgetown.

Blessings in Christ,
Liz Nash
Heart of Texas Association Minister



12/20/15 Robin Chapman and Tom VandeStadt were delighted to have their daughter Alex home for the holidays.

On **Sunday, Dec. 6**, the Sunday School class did a great job of educating the congregation about the production and distribution of **fair trade chocolate** and how we as a group can help the workers who produce the chocolate. Teacher **Amy Rivera** and the children had worked on a poster and each student spoke. Fair trade chocolate (and coffee) are sold several Sundays a month during coffee hour. Since their presentation, a number of folks have mentioned how they now just walk by the chocolate aisle at the grocery store and are gratifying their love of chocolate and helping the workers at the same time by purchasing fair trade chocolate at church.



12/6/15 The Sunday School presentation on fair trade chocolate--Caleb Parkhill, Francesca Dietz, Isabella Dietz, teacher Amy Rivera, William Harris, John Dietz, and Harrison Tucker

Recently, **Hudson (Bill) Phillips** wondered if the **National Campus Ministry Association** was still in existence. He writes, "I had been an active member during the mid sixties and seventies. My wife and daughter took part with me in an international theological seminar at three German universities in 1969. In its heyday it was always willing to try experimental, and often successful, forms of ministry, working with college administration as well as with students (it even voted to extend an invitation too **Mohammed Ali** to become a member-back when he had become a Muslim and refused induction into the armed forces. Yes, I was there, and even contributed money and joined two ministers for the phone call. This was interesting because he had just been condemned by the **Black Baptist Association**. The purpose was to give him some credentials for his application for conscientious objection.) It was a bit of church history that I continue to be proud of. Well, now they are welcoming this 81-year-old retired minister to renew my membership. I am receiving their monthly newsletter and quite a bit of encouragement. Now that my health is improving we shall see what we shall see." Good work, Bill!

Keep **Doyal** and **Tommie Pinkard** in your prayers. At this writing, Doyal has had several stays at **South Austin Medical Center**. The first involved a bad fall in the bathroom and a cut on his head. He was diagnosed with an e. coli infection and is slowly recovering. He also had another stay with some heart irregularities. They have home health, physical therapists, and other help coming every day, so they are in good hands. Tommie and Doyal particularly enjoyed and appreciated a 5-day visit from son **David**. Tommie is very grateful to their neighbor **Sue** who saw the ambulance arriving late in the night after Doyal's fall and rushed over in her pajamas to see what she could do. She ended up driving Tommie to the hospital where they stayed for 8 hours while the doctors got Doyal stabilized--Sue, still in her PJs. If you would like to send a card to the Pinkards, send it to 813 Castle Ridge Road, Austin, TX 78746-5105.

Return Service Requested

February Visitor Deadline—January 20, 2015

History Corner

by Pat and Mel Oakes

We were stumped when we came to the last medallion on the pulpit side **Mel** (a.k.a. Sherlock Holmes) started some research on the **Benjamins**. A while later Mel came in and told me that **Eleanor Benjamin's** maiden name was **Morgan**. At that point I remembered that **Ellie Towery's** maiden name was Morgan. We called **Ches Towery** and **Mary Towery Masters**--and sure enough, it was their great-aunt and uncle. Then we had a wonderful phone reunion with Eleanor Towery's sister—**Betty Morgan Tarvin Gentry** in Phoenix—who filled us in on more details. Ches Towery is looking for photos of the Benjamins which we can add to our archives. This sleuthing is such fun!!

Eleanor Mae Morgan (1885-1971) married **Waldo Benjamin** (1885-1963) in **1906**, in Cincinnati, **Ohio**. Waldo was a chemist and manager who worked in the shoe business--worked on developing dyes for shoe polish. They had two adopted children, **Esther** and **Reece**.

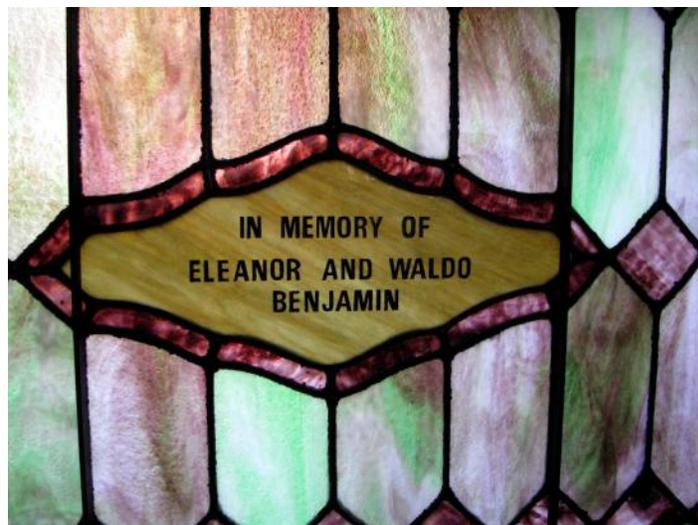
Eleanor Towery always talked about being raised in **Ohio**. Eleanor and Waldo stayed connected with the six nieces and nephews of her brother, **Gomer Morgan**, and his wife **Ruth**, parents of Eleanor Towery and her five siblings. Gomer died quite young and Ruth was left to raise the children alone. The five youngest were put together into foster care and the eldest brother joined the military.

Mary Towery Masters remembers their trips to visit Waldo and Eleanor when they retired to **Coral Gables, Florida**. Her mother, Eleanor Towery, was always quite

solicitous of her aunt Eleanor. When Eleanor Benjamin died, she left a bequest to Eleanor which enabled John and Eleanor to purchase the church parsonage at **1421 Ridgeway**. The church was happy for this to happen as folks felt that parsonages were generally unfair to ministers as they accrued no equity to the occupants.

—Pat and Mel Oakes

For more information on the Benjamins--and more information about the history of the church, go to the church Web page and click on Church History--or click on http://www.congregationalchurchofaustin.org/cca_history/Congregational_Church_of_Austin_History/Welcome.html



This window was dedicated by Reverend John and Eleanor Towery to honor Eleanor's aunt, Eleanor Mae Morgan Benjamin.