

THE VISITOR

March 2020

The Congregational Church of Austin **United Church of Christ**

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Rev. Thomas J. VandeStadt



I periodically take a seven-day silent retreat at a forest retreat center in New Mexico. During those retreats, I disappear every day into a forest in the mountains to meditate. To meditate is to stop distracting myself from myself, to face myself truthfully, and at times to struggle with myself. That's not all meditation is, but that's part of it.

I'm not completely alone by myself on these retreats. I meditate with other people in a group several times a day, and I meet several times a week with a small group and a skilled teacher to communicate in words what we're experiencing.

During these retreats, the teachers do their best to create what they call a safe container for everything we experience, be it painful or joyful. The setting itself is a safe container. The forest with its ancient trees, the mountains with their rocky ledges, the sky with its shape-shifting clouds—the space itself is vast enough

to hold all our feelings, emotions, and thoughts. But also, and no less important, the group of people with whom we meet is a safe container—other people to whom we can safely entrust our experience, without judgement, with care.

I've discovered in the process that the more I share with others, the more I know myself. Putting into words what I'm experiencing can be challenging, sharing my thoughts and feelings with others can be challenging, but in doing so I know myself more.

During Lent, I'd like to see if we can create a safe container in church. I'd like to see if some of us can gather together after worship on four occasions to create a safe space where we can face ourselves truthfully, express in words what we're experiencing, and share with one another what we're feeling, thinking, and perhaps struggling with in our lives right now. A safe space where we can face, and share with one another, four fundamental aspects of our humanity—our fear, our hope, our grief, and our joy.

We'll start each gathering by reading a very brief reflection on fear, hope, grief, or joy. We'll then take a bit of time to write about our fear, hope, grief, or joy—to name it and to describe how we experience it. We'll place our fear, hope, grief, or joy, written in words on paper, in a basket that will represent a safe container for it. We'll pray that we ourselves may be a safe container for one another's fear, hope, grief, or joy. Then, to the extent we feel safe and moved, we'll speak to one another about our fear, hope, grief, or joy, sharing as much or as little as we feel moved to share. And if we choose not to speak at all, that's fine. After everyone is done speaking, we'll pray for one another's fear, hope, grief, or joy. We'll pray that we may remain a safe container for one another's fear, hope, grief, or joy throughout the week.

I'm hoping that some of us will find this to be a fruitful Lenten practice. To face ourselves truthfully, and to express in words what we're experiencing as human beings—that's the essence of confession. Confession is truthful self-disclosure. In Lent, that's our focus—truthful self-disclosure. To yourself, to God, and perhaps, to others with whom you feel safe. Others who care for you, without judging you. Others who pray with you, and for you. Others who think of you during the week, wonder how you're doing, and hope you're OK.

Creating a safe container for truthful self-disclosure. I'm hoping that some of us will find this to be a fruitful Lenten practice. Here's the schedule for our gatherings: March 8 (fear), March 22 (hope), April 5 (Palm/Passion Sunday, grief), April 19 (first Sunday after Easter, joy).

Tom

April Visitor Deadline March 27, 2020

Church Leadership

Deacons Chair	Faye Dierksen
Outreach Team	Whit Bodman
Moderator	Joy Penticuff
Treasurer	Gail Christeson
Financial Secretary	Dennis Murphy
Christian Education Coordinators	Jaime Hadley
Youth Sunday School	Amy Kent Rivera
Clerk	Reuel Nash
Historians	Pat & Mel Oakes
Webmaster	Mel Oakes
Member-At-Large	Bill Beardall

Heart of Texas Association News March

by Liz Nash

Our Heart of Texas Association Spring Meeting will be on Saturday, April 4th, at Weimar UCC.

Registration starts at 10:30 a.m. with the meeting **beginning at 11 a.m.** We will start with worship in the sanctuary and then move to lunch and our meeting in the Weimar church's fellowship hall. We anticipate having people go through the lunch line right after worship, so we can eat and meet at the same time. Our offering will go to donate to provide supplies to those living outdoors at the border in Matamoros awaiting asylum. We will be accepting money and supplies (list of items needed to be distributed later) to be sent down on a trip that United Christian is making later this spring. Those who wish to stay a bit after the meeting are welcome to help sort donated supplies. All paperwork (agendas, reports, and other paperwork we have handed out in the past) will be posted on the Heart of Texas Association website, <http://hotaucc.org/>, the week before the meeting. In order to save paper, we ask that people download these from the website, as we will have only a few copies.

At our meeting, we anticipate discussion and a vote on whether to support the formation of a conference-wide fitness review committee. A fitness review, in the United Church of Christ, is a serious and demanding process that takes place when the fitness of a minister for ministry is brought into question, usually due to a serious accusation. At this time, fitness reviews are held at the Association level by our Committee on Ministry, which has the general task of oversight of ministers in the UCC. When a fitness review occurs, Committee on Ministry members have to be trained in the process, members must recuse themselves if they are close to the person who is the subject of the review, a trained team must be sent to interview people close to the situation, and there are other demanding aspects of the process. During the time of the fitness review, the other tasks

of the Committee on Ministry need to continue and, as in any situation where there is a problem of this sort, it is difficult to get work done. Some other Conferences have moved fitness reviews to a Conference level committee, which allows a group to be "on call" with ongoing training and without other ministry oversight tasks to handle. At our Association Meeting, we will be deciding whether to support this initiative, and our meeting is scheduled in time to give our answer to the Conference Board at its April meeting as they prepare for a possible decision at the South Central Conference Annual Meeting in June. In addition, we anticipate discussion on a few proposed changes to the Conference bylaws.

We also anticipate having either one or two Ecclesiastical Councils, following ordination interviews for one or more candidates to be held at the Committee on Ministry's meeting on Tuesday, March 31st. I will be sending out the information on Ecclesiastical Councils to our churches and ministers as soon we can on March 31st, and we will be posting the relevant ordination papers on our website as soon as possible.

Finally, on Sunday, February 16th, the Friends Congregational Church Choir sang the Requiem by **John Rutter** in Carnegie Hall in New York City as part of the Distinguished Concerts Orchestra and Singers Series. I had the privilege of hearing this inspiring and beautiful concert, along with several folks from Friends. **Congratulations, Friends choir!**

Blessings in Christ,
Liz Nash, Association Minister

Personals by Pat Oakes

Annie Nash ventured to El Salvador with Liz Nash on Liz's annual mission trip with UCC friends to Alegria during the last week of January. It was a 30th birthday present to Annie, and a chance for both of them to spend a week in one of the best ways they could. Annie flew down from Vermont and met Liz and Jackie Allstot (from the Omaha area) in the Houston airport. The group this year had an interesting project to help with: the repainting of a court used by kids to play soccer in the middle of town. Liz thought it would mostly be painting lines on the ground, but instead it was a project led by an artist to replace the faded murals around the two walls bordering the court. The group helped paint the white and colored backgrounds. Then, at night, pictures of well-known Salvadorans from Alegria were projected on the walls to allow artist/workers to draw them. Then, the portraits were painted during the day. In addition, a mural was painted on the concrete seats of the nearby lake in the volcano crater, an attraction that brings people to the area. Their friend Oscar who brings the group to Alegria had Liz buy a book about one of the subjects of the portraits, **Alfredo Masferrer**, a public figure who advocated a philosophy known as Vitalismo that supported human rights and who, as a pacifist, tried to prevent the conflict known as the Peasant Uprising in 1932 that resulted in the killing of thousands of peasants. The group also visited the greenhouses they worked on last year and saw the plants growing which the locals sell. In parts of the greenhouses the group saw plants that had gone to seed for the purpose of collecting seeds for next year, along with collections of drying seeds. In addition, Liz went with Oscar and Tito, their friend from the Alcalde's office, to buy supplies in the neighboring city, Santiago de Maria, requested by the principal of the school in San Juan I, a local rural community. The group had a joyful time delivering those supplies, along with the ones Liz brought, to the school along with a hearty lunch -- a real treat for these kids. The bookends of the trip were at a beach hotel near the airport, giving a little quiet time for the group to enjoy each other at a very different and lovely place



1/30/20 Annie and Liz Nash cooling off at the local laguna in Alegria, El Salvador



1/31/20 The town soccer court in Alegria which Liz and Annie and the group helped to paint

Personals (cont) by Pat Oakes

Sunday, February 23, was a day filled with celebration and advocacy in the life of our church. It was the Sunday before Mardi Gras and Nodie and the trio and choir shared wonderful music with us—mostly jazz—enjoyed by all. After the service, the congregation delightedly marched and danced into the fellowship hall to the syncopated rhythms of “We Are Marching In The Light Of God.” During the service, **Savanna (Sav)** and **Harrison Tucker** were confirmed with deacons and parents **Pam** and **Alison Goodgame-Tucker** beaming their support. Pastor **Tom** welcomed them both on behalf of us all. **Savanna** is a senior at Anderson High School in the International Baccalaureate program. Last year **Sav** coached soccer for a season with six–eight year olds at the YMCA in east Austin. She is captain of varsity basketball team. She is co-captain of Anderson Ultimate frisbee team and a member of National Honor Society and National Spanish Honor Society.

She hosted an exchange student from Spain for two weeks and she will be going to Spain for two weeks around spring break as an exchange student. She has played on Texas Tango U19 in the Ultimate national tournament for the past 3 years. She has not made a decision on which college yet. She wants to go to law school eventually. **Harrison** is a freshman at Anderson High School. He plays on the freshman B basketball team and finished with a winning record. He is enjoying high school and plays on the Anderson Ultimate frisbee team. He also loves playing Magic the Gathering, a strategic card game that has collectable cards. He plays tournaments regularly and will be going to Houston to play a tournament with several of his friends in March. He is working on his written driver’s exam and he is interested in studying film making. Deacon **Lynne Lemley**, who was introducing the two, noted that Harrison had tied the first prayer tie onto the prayer net a number of years ago.



2/23/20 Confirmation service--Jen Howicz, Faye Dierksen, John Goff, Pam, Savanna, and Harrison Tucker, Allison Goodgame-Tucker, Lynne Lemley, and Pastor Tom VandeStadt

Personals (cont)
by Pat Oakes

Once the congregation made it to the fellowship hall, there were two parties going on—lots of cake for everyone—one celebrating the confirmations and the other the much anticipated baby shower for **Xitlali Nicole Hernandez-Geer**, the newly adopted daughter of **Jonathan** and **Roberto**, who was born on Jan. 13th. Everyone enjoyed oohing and aaahing over precious **Xitlali**, congratulating her proud parents, and watching the baby gifts being opened. For her debut at the church, **Xitlali** was very well-behaved, just cooing softly several times during the service.



2/23/2020 Jonathan and Roberto with adorable, wide-awake Xitlali at the shower

At 3 that same afternoon, a baker's dozen of us made our way to University United Methodist Church where Austin Interfaith was holding its accountability session for the upcoming primary in early March. The candidates agree in advance to answer yes or no to the issues presented by Austin Interfaith with 30 seconds each to speak. No Republican candidates accepted the invitation to the accountability session. All of the candidates agreed to support the issues presented by Austin Interfaith. They had hoped to have 100 folks in attendance from various churches and organizations, but more than 150 showed up to hear the Democratic primary candidates for District 10, U.S. House of Representatives and the Democratic candidates for Travis County District Attorney. **Joy Penticuff** was helping to moderate the meeting, **Tom VandeStadt** gave the benediction, and **Kay Pruett** and **Lynn Chavarria** arrived after the group photo was taken.



2/23/20 We were well-represented at the Austin Interfaith Accountability Session at University Methodist Church-- back-- Jen Howicz, Sara Ross, Nodie Murphy, Dave Ross, Pat and Mel Oakes; front--Jaime Hadley, Betty Bodman, Lynne Lemley

Debby Kohrt enjoyed a family trip to Nashotah, Wisconsin, in January. **Debby, Kristen, Jason, Caleb,** and **Zoey** visited **Jarod** (**Debby's** son and **Kristen's** brother) and his wife **Laurel** and their children **Wesley** and **Brynn**. They were gone from Jan. 15th-20th. The first night when they flew in to Milwaukee it was six degrees—too cold to snow! It warmed up into the 20's and snowed Friday. **Caleb** and **Zoey** loved it! They all had their pictures taken Saturday when it was still in the 20's which was bearable.



1/18/20 Enjoying the snow in Nashotah, WI, were Caleb, Kristen, Jason, Debby, Zoey, Laurel's mom Carol, Laurel holding baby Brynn, Wesley (3), and Jarod

Personals (cont)
by Pat Oakes



1/18/20 A gaggle of grandchildren—Caleb holding cousin Brynn, Wesley with cousin Zooley—in Nashotah, WI

Sharp-eyed **Dennis Murphy** spotted **Joan** and **Bill Mueller** who made the front page of the web version of the Feb. 23rd Washington Post!



Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez (D) greets supporters in Austin last month. Ramirez is running for the seat held by Sen. John Cornyn (R). (Sergio Flores for The Post)

A Latina candidate for the Senate asks a question: As Texas Democrats rise, who gets to represent them?

2/23/20 Joan and Bill Mueller, center, greeting U.S. Senate primary candidate Cristina Tzintzun Ramirez (D) at a gathering last month

Our stellar cellist **Tony Rogers** wants us to know about The Austin Cello Choir which is an all-ages, all-levels, all-inclusive, all-cello ensemble for any student of the cello. **Tony** has been directing the group since 2011. He treats it like a democracy. Each semester the group votes on what they should play, and then he arranges the music. They have performed over 100 pieces that he has mostly ended up arranging. It's a wonderful time and the balance of young and old really makes it feel community-centered. Tony is so thankful to the church for giving them a space to meet weekly (usually Monday evenings) for 1 1/2 hours. This semester so far they are playing SIBELIUS "Valse Triste," DICK DALE "Miserlou," TEARS FOR FEARS "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" CABELLA "Havana," VILLA-LOBOS, "Bachianas Brasilieras #5." Their upcoming concert is May 5, likely at Blackerby Violin Shop. Stay tuned.



The Austin Cello Choir with director Tony Rogers (in back with arm upraised) making beautiful music in the fellowship room

History Corner by Pat & Mel Oakes

Many of us have brought special guests to church at one time or another, but **Rambie Briggs** brought a friend of the family, a very distinguished, memorable guest in the early 1990s—**Barbara Jordan**. It happened to be a Sunday when **Pat Oakes** was reading the scriptures. After the service, she approached **Ms. Jordan** and told her that she (**Pat**) had felt like she was reading the Bible in front of God Almighty. **Barbara** smiled graciously and thanked her. Wikipedia tells us that **Barbara Charline Jordan** (February 21, 1936 – January 17, 1996) was an American lawyer, educator and politician who was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. A Democrat, she was the first African-American elected to the Texas Senate after Reconstruction and the first Southern African-American woman elected to the United States House of Representatives. She was best known for her eloquent opening statement at the House Judiciary Committee hearings during the impeachment process against **Richard Nixon**, and as the first African-American as well as the first woman to deliver a keynote address at a Democratic National Convention. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, among numerous other honors. She was the first African-American woman to be buried in the Texas State Cemetery. One bit of her life that some church members might find meaningful is the story of **Melanie Wilkinson** and **Barbara Jordan**. **Rambie** remembers that when daughter **Paula** (now **Serenity**) and **Michael Fracasso** married on June 14, 1994, he had asked **Melanie** to sing at the wedding at St. Austin's Catholic Church. Their priest and **Yoshi Kaneda** officiated. It was a beautiful service and **Barbara** attended though she was recovering from pneumonia at the time. **Michael** selected the music for the recessional. It was "Life is a Ball Game" by **Wynona Carr**. **Barbara** loved the song and loved **Melanie**. Thereafter, **Melanie** would join in **Barbara's** annual spring picnic at her home. There was always much singing and joy. **Melanie** sang "Life is a Ball Game" at many events that honored or included **Barbara**. She also sang the song at **Barbara's** Austin memorial service. **Rambie** always felt that **Melanie** brought some of the spirit of our little

congregation into **Barbara Jordan's** world. Sadly, we do not have a video of **Melanie** singing it, but here is the link to the song and the writer of the song.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0dMYEJEOEg&list=RDz0dMYEJEOEg&start_radio=1&t=0



5/17/03 Melanie Wilkinson at Mel and Pat Oakes' 40th wedding anniversary party where she sang "Life is a Ballgame" accompanied by Florence Castle. Melanie died much too young on Feb. 23, 2009, in a tragic automobile accident, 11 years ago



Barbara Jordan 1936-96 A brilliant orator, American lawyer, educator and politician