

# THE VISITOR

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

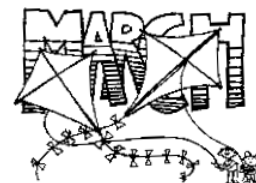
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Rev. Thomas J. VandeStadt

Rev. John Towery, Pastor Emeritus



You, darkness of whom I am born—

I love you more than the flame  
that limits the world  
to the circle it illumines  
and excludes all the rest.

But the dark embraces everything:  
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,  
people, nations—just as they are.

It lets me imagine  
A great presence stirring beside me.

I believe in the night.

From *Book of Hours*, Rainier Maria Rilke

During our Annual Meeting in January, we made a big decision—to enter into a conversation with several other churches to explore with one another our respective futures and the possibility of sharing a common future as one church. In preparation for this conversation with the other churches, we also decided to look more closely at ourselves—to study different scenarios for our future financial viability, to conduct an evaluation of all our current ministries, and to reflect on our communal vision as a church—so we can bring this knowledge to the table when we have our conversation with the other churches.

With our decision to enter this conversation, our future as a church has suddenly cracked wide open in ways we've not seriously considered since I've been here. With far more profundity and far less certainty, we can now truly ask ourselves: what form will our church take five to ten years from now?

To use a bit of biblical imagery, we've decided to shine our light into the darkness. But by darkness, I don't mean that which is in opposition to God or Christ, as in "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." The darkness to which I'm referring has no negative moral or spiritual connotations to it. Rather, this darkness simply refers to the unknown.

In a poem from his *Book of Hours*, Rainier Maria Rilke expresses his love for the darkness. Indeed, he loves the darkness more than "the flame that limits the world to the circle it illumines." What wonderful imagery. The flame's light extends only so far, illuminates only so much, and excludes all outside its reach. Many possibilities exist in the darkness—possibilities not yet seen or known. The darkness stirs the imagination.

By deciding to shine our light in the darkness, we've decided to venture out and explore beyond the limits of our current circle of light. Right now, our vision, ministry, and identity as a church exist within our current circle of light. But the darkness beyond our circle of light has stirred our imagination.

What do we not yet see?

What do we not yet know?

What have we not yet contemplated?

Who could we be, and what could we do, if we shined our light into the darkness and saw what possibilities exist out there?

Who knows? How could we possibly know?

We've not carried our light into the darkness yet? But we're going to.

Carrying our light into the darkness, venturing out into unknown territory, cracking our future wide open, may be very exciting for some of us. For others, it may be stressful, even frightening. For me it's exciting, stressful, and a bit frightening. I think it'll be important for us to develop some mechanism, some system, some way for us to identify and articulate how we feel throughout this process, and to support one another through the inevitable ups and downs, twist and turns of this journey.

Taking this journey will entail bringing to serious consideration a number of issues that the current membership of our church hasn't considered before. These issues will include the possibility of doing new things in new ways in new places with new people, and they may include the possibility of letting go of familiar things, ways, places, and people.

In the process of having this conversation, I imagine there will be things we agree on quickly, things we agree on only after much discussion, and things some of us never agree on. Sometimes this conversation will be enjoyable. Other times it will be painful. Sometimes some of us may feel happy, hopeful, and content with how the conversation is going, while others may feel sad, pessimistic, and angry about where it's leading.

Like I said: exciting, stressful, frightening. We'll need some way to identify and articulate how we feel during this process, and some way to support one another.

Throughout the conversations we have amongst ourselves, and the conversations we have with other churches, I think it'll be tempting to focus most of our time and energy on their institutional aspects—finances, building usage, denominational affiliation, organizational structure, staffing—and these are all important. But the very heart and soul of the conversation needs to focus on our hearts and souls, and how we relate to Christ, one another, and the world.

So please, let us not lose sight of the fact that the church is not, first and foremost, an institution. And *please*, the church *is not* a building. The church is, first and foremost, relationships—relationships between people who share their deepest joys and pains, who pray and worship together, who celebrate birth and new life together, who bury one another at death, and who seek to heal and reconcile the world together. The church consists of relationships rooted in love, trust, mercy, forgiveness, and sacrifice of self. Everything else—the buildings, money, organizational structure, and staff—are subservient to and at the service of sustaining and strengthening Christ-like relationships.

So, let us make sure we do not forget or lose our identity as a church as we venture together into the darkness. May Christ's light continue to shine with us and in us.

Tom

**“The Great Metanoia: Transforming Our Stories, Ourselves, and the World”**

Join us for the second half of the “GM” class (even if you missed the fall session) to examine the connections between competing cultural narratives, our sense of who we are, the mission of the church, and eco/social justice in the world. Our consciousness swims amongst big stories - such as evolution, the Bible, capitalism, and deep ecology along with those of our local community and personal lives. Each has different consequences. As Christ's disciples, let us contemplate together our responsibility and creativity in choosing, telling, and living stories that result in both personal growth and prophetic love for our earth community. Class will meet Sundays after worship until 2pm, March 13 – April 17.



**MARCH BIRTHDAYS**

- |                       |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Alan Duff           | 17 Mona Maser            |
| 4 Jillian Tomasek     | 17 Lori Gooding          |
| 9 Debbie Herst        | 18 Julianne Lippert      |
| 11 Alex VandeStadt    | 22 Kristin Galle Hampton |
| 12 Jennifer Howicz    | John Drachenberg         |
| Marilyn Vaché         | 23 John Herst            |
| 13 Richard Jackson    | 26 John Towery           |
| 14 Lisa Leaf          | 27 Mary Herst            |
| Margit Frances Briggs | 28 David Rossiter        |
| 15 Mary Sinclair      |                          |

**Chairs of our Boards**

Trustees:	Jaime Hadley
Deacons:	Joe McMillan
Christian Outreach:	
Moderator	Reuel Nash

## PERSONALS

by Pat Oakes

Sunday, Feb. 13th, was a special day at the church. It was the day that the choir and the congregation honored **Dr. Matt** (a.k.a. Mathis) **Blackstock** for his more than 50 years of singing the choir (he retired several months ago) and many more years of service to the congregation and the wider community. It was a grand celebration including drama (the children presented a play of "The Good Samaritan"), original music (an anthem commissioned by the choir and written by Linda Bolding, former director of the Round Rock Community Choir), a dedication of a window in honor of Matt, great hymns sung with great gusto (at Matt's request), and a meaningful reflection delivered by Tom thanking Matt for allowing us to honor him. Following the service, the overflow crowd (which included wife Mary and brother David and sister-in-law Marge and many more friends and colleagues) celebrated the occasion with an elegant repast during a coffee hour hosted by the choir. Nodie Murphy (who organized the whole morning) presented Matt with a wonderful scrapbook chronicling Matt's years at the church and filled with stories from many members and friends. Look for Matt's window as a part of the anchor window near the piano on the choir side of the church. Check for pictures of the event at the end of the Visitor.

The cast of the church play, "**The Good Samaritan**" under the direction of teacher Robynne Heymans, included: Narrator 1--Tess Howicz, Narrator 2--Savanna Tucker, Attacker-- Harrison Tucker, Injured traveler-- Rose Summerlin, Priest--John Dietz, Scholars-- Scarlett and Juliet Quisenberry, the Samaritan--Vivian Summerlin, Innkeeper-- Isabella Dietz, Friend-- Francesca Dietz. It was an exciting and moving performance entered into with gusto (and costumes and makeup!) by the actors. (See photo at the end of the Visitor)

**Ben H. White** has sold his home and moved to smaller quarters in assisted living at Westminster Manor and made the common mistake of inadequate downsizing. His sister-in-law has come to the rescue and agreed to spread the excess household goods among Marguerite's nieces and nephews. Several family members and friends have helped with the move; a friend's pickup made it all possible. Ben's phone number remains the same, but his new address is 4100 Jackson Avenue, Apartment 16, Austin, TX 78731.

Welcome to new members **Eliot and Felicia Scott** (and their children Skye, 5, and Sterling, 2) who joined our church by letter of transfer from Plymouth UCC in Spring, TX. Felicia jumped right in to the activities of the church and was one of our members who went on the mission trip to El Salvador in January. Felicia has just finished her master's in human services and social work and Eliot is working in a masters of information sciences degree at UT.

Welcome also to new member **Megan Snell**. She joined the church in December, is a student at Texas State, plans to go to seminary in the fall and hopes to become a Navy chaplain.

Trish Karli, church secretary for 9 years, retired at the end of February. We all thank Trish for her hard work and cheerful presence during that time. Her husband re-

tired 2 years ago, so they are looking forward to more time together!

It was a special treat on Sunday, Feb. 20, to have **Mary Sinclair**, visiting from Canada, and **Bob and Debbie Appel Knowlton** with Emily and Sam, visiting from New York, with us. Mary was on a whirlwind trip to Texas (husband Dick was at a meeting elsewhere) and the Knowlton family was here for their winter break to visit with Debbie's dad Vic and his wife Betty. (See photos at the end of the Visitor)

**Fran and Rambie Briggs** spent a week in New Orleans with their Mississippi friends, David and Karlyn Stephens and son Josh. While there they attended services at Central-St. Matthew's. It is a merger of Central Congregational which was heavily damaged by Katrina and St. Matthew's UCC. The new church is preparing to call a pastor for this historic endeavor. They visited with John and Ellen Pecoul and accompanied them to a storied New Orleans restaurant for lunch--one of the many highlights of their trip. The Pecouls are the parents of Rachel Dietz.

**Gail Christeson** spent 6.5 weeks this past fall on the research vessel *Iron Cat* collecting seismic data in the Gulf of Mexico. The *Iron Cat* is an older ship recently refitted for seismic work, and its time sitting at dock showed as there were constant problems with generators, engines, air compressors, and air hoses. In addition, the caterers couldn't seem to order the correct amount of food so there were unexpected stops at Theodore (AL), Port O'Connor (TX; twice), and Fresh Water City (LA) for food, supplies, and spare parts. To top it off, the cruise encountered several storms with gale force winds and 10+ foot seas. Three weeks after docking in Louisiana, Gail and family took a much different cruise on a Carnival ship that stopped in Jamaica, Grand Cayman, and Cozumel -- a much more fun and relaxing trip.

On Saturday, January 22nd - Saturday, January 29, five members from the Congregational Church of Austin responded to the invitation through the South Central Conference to travel to El Salvador, joining folks who are now friends, on a three church mission trip to Alegria, El Salvador, for a magnificent week together. The group consisted of people from First Congregational Church of Council Bluffs, Iowa; from Swiss United Church of Christ of New Glaurus, Wisconsin; and our Austin group including **Beth Gleason** (seminary student in care), **Felicia Scott**, **Cindy Locke**, **Becky Nash**, and **Liz Nash**. After meeting and getting acquainted at a hotel in San Salvador, they joined their brothers and sisters at Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel for worship and communion, then traveled together to the town of Alegria, where they stayed in hostels and tourist cabins. Although they had hoped to work on a rainwater catchment system, the government funding needed to support this work was not forthcoming, so their work changed. The group worked side by side with local people on three projects in the area during the week: a community center in Las Americas, a community that is part of Alegria, a larger community center in nearby Yomo; and a garden in nearby Quebrachos. The community centers, made of concrete blocks strengthened with reinforcing rods, allow people to have a decent gathering place. The garden work they did with

people from the very poor community of Quebrachos was to dig terraces in a very steep hillside and bring up bags of compost from the floor of the woods below. This effort prepared the land for a vegetable garden to allow a better diet for the people there as well as food to sell in the local area. A number of people from the group also went to present school supplies to kids sponsored by the New Glaurus church in very rural communities. Some of the group traveled back to San Salvador on Thursday afternoon, allowing them to spend Friday visiting the pier where all kinds of seafood is brought in, cleaned, and sold at La Libertad (smells included); the chapel where Bishop Oscar Romero was martyred and the simple quarters nearby where he lived; the chapel dedicated to the 6 Jesuit priests and their caretakers murdered at their home at the University of Central America (UCA) during the civil war; and the Romero Center there sharing the terrible history of that war and the stories of the church workers who were killed. They were particularly moved by the Stations of the Cross at the UCA chapel consisting of sketches of torture and suffering during the war. The group is very thankful for Rev. Tom Neilsen, who brought all of the churches together as part of his many years of travel and work in El Salvador and in Mexico; to Rev. Miguel Castro, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel in San Salvador, who provided the logistical and spiritual support for their trip; and to Oscar Rodriguez, the church worker whose life work is to empower poor people in El Salvador. Miguel, Oscar, and their families suffered in the war, and their response is to work for human dignity. The groups thanks, too, those who donated toward the projects and travel to make this trip possible. They hope they can go again next year, and invite others in the church and the South Central Conference to join them. You can look at pictures of the trip at <https://picasaweb.google.com/reuelnash/ElSalvadorMissionTrip2011#>

One picture is included at the end of the Visitor.

**Lisa Kirch**, art history professor at the University of Northern Alabama in Florence, AL, reports that her daughter Sarah is at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham and very happy. She's with kids who share her interests and values, and the coursework is challenging. She's getting ready to audition for admission to a different program. Although she was admitted for creative writing, she's decided to change to visual arts. Lisa is not surprised, but she is amazed at how much she's progressed in painting and drawing. Lisa observes that this is not from classes--it's just from being around the other kids. Lisa is also excited to report that she is writing. She's written every day since New Year's: at the stroke of midnight, she went back to her book. She now has three rough chapters. She's also sent off an article and has another due in July.

**The Church Ladies** spelling team will be participating for the 7th time in the 8th annual Great Grown-Up Spelling Bee put on by the Literacy Coalition of Central Texas. The event is at the Austin Music Hall on Thursday, April 28, from 11:30-1:15. They have to raise \$1500 to field a team, so are asking for donations from their church members (Congregational Church of Austin--**Pat Oakes** and Central Presbyterian --Susan Richter and Laurel Stoddard). Doyal and Tommie Pinkard have

agreed to take care of collecting the contributions. If you would like to donate, either give your contribution to Pat or Tommie or Doyal at church, or send it to Pinkards at 813 Castle Ridge Road, Austin, TX 78746.

**Doyal and Tommie Pinkard** are delighted to announce the birth of their grandchild, Daphne Scarlett Connole, the daughter and first child of son David and his wife Suzanne Connole. She was born at 11:59 on Thursday Feb. 17. She came into the world weighing 7 pounds, 6 ounces. Daphne is Tommie's first name (who knew!) and she will use the Connole last name as she is the only family member of her generation to carry on Suzanne's family name. Grandparents Doyal and Tommie arrived in NYC a week later to make her acquaintance.

**Whit Bodman's** father, Herbert Luther Bodman, Jr., 86, died in North Carolina, on Feb. 6, while Whit was there with other family members. The memorial service was held a week later in North Carolina. Betty was able to take time off from her teaching and be there with the family. A very special thing was that every one of his descendants, save one, was able to come to the service. That included Whit and Betty's son and daughter-in-law who came all the way from Montana. Even though it was a very sad time for everyone, it was a great family time--celebrating the long, good life of a World War II veteran, a wonderful husband and father, a Middle East scholar, and an indomitable sailor.

Our sympathy goes out to **Michael Adams** and his family on the death of Michael's father J.D. on Feb. 18. The week prior to his death, Michael, his son Jamie (who turned 26 that week), and Jamie's son Phillip, went to Atlanta, TX, where they spent several days with his dad and other family members and old friends. Since there was to be no funeral service, Michael felt that the time spent with his dad and family and friends served as a fitting memorial to his father.

**Tess Howicz** would like to thank the congregation and friends for their generous support during the Girl Scout cookie sales. Tess and her troop really appreciate it! They are looking forward to outings, camping and helping others with the money they raised. On February 20, Jim achieved a year-long goal of walking the Austin Half Marathon. Childhood friend Gary Kenny flew down from Chicago to run the same and to support Jim in his endeavor. We are so proud of Jim, and grateful to all for their support and enthusiasm towards Jim's health changes this past year! (photo at the end of the Visitor)

**Marilyn Harris**, former church cellist and member of the church, and Clay McKelvy will marry on May 15th at the family home in Wimberley--right by the river. He is attending ACC and hoping to be a mechanical engineer. Marilyn reports that it is a late start for college (he just turned 50). Clay helped his son get a degree from Concordia in environmental engineering, and Clay's son was the first person in his family ever to get a college degree. Now it's Clay's turn!! Marilyn has left her job at UT and is looking for a new job in tough economic times. She has excellent references from the office of Vice-President for Research and is bemused to note that her former job has now been turned into two jobs!

It has been a while since we have seen **Sam Bean** at church, but he is still here in Austin--South Austin to be

specific. He is the groundskeeper for the co-op where he lives, and has also been playing acoustic music pretty regularly at the following open mics: House Wine (on Mondays): [www.housewineaustin.com](http://www.housewineaustin.com); Opa! (on Tuesdays): [www.opacoffeewine.com](http://www.opacoffeewine.com); Irie Bean (on Wednesdays): [www.iriebean.com](http://www.iriebean.com); Flipnotics (on Thursdays): [www.flipnotics.com](http://www.flipnotics.com). Check it out.

A brief note (in reference to our "blizzard"--1 inch of snow-- on Feb. 4) from **Edith Scott** who, with her family, was active in the church for the year they were here from Scotland in 1986. "We've been following the 2000 mile snow slick stretching north from Texas. It must have been quite a shock. Although we consider an inch to be a 'dusting', our car tyres are designed for the colder temperatures, but I imagine there would be a few bumps and collisions during your bad weather. We had terrible snow in November and December that caused us to grind to a halt on a number of days. Young David was stranded in Perth, but he managed to book into a hotel for the night - just as well as temperatures were -14 C that night."

### BRAZOS ASSOCIATION NEWS

On October 4-5, a group of ministers and lay people from several churches in the South Central Conference gathered at Slumber Falls for Boundary Training, led by Cheryl von Ehrenkrook, graduate of Brite Divinity School and former military JAG attorney. Cheryl attended a one-week training for leadership of this workshop at the Faith Trust Institute, an organization that is nationally recognized for its resources and training in this area. Those from the Brazos Association who completed the Boundary Training in October include Tom VandeStadt, John Sumner, Jerry Carpenter, Karl Tewold, Liz Nash, Charlotte Albert, Karen Nelson (who has ministerial standing in the North Texas Association and lives in Burton), and Anne Wehrly.

This training is taking on additional importance since our Association will be requiring it of our active ministers. However, before I discuss that requirement, I want to describe what the training is and why it is so helpful. Most people associate Boundary Training with sexual abuse issues such as sexual harassment and abuse of children. Some of us wonder if it teaches that we can never hug each other. While the training does cover clergy sexual boundaries, it provides much more than that. We heard perspectives on and discussed financial conduct, appropriate friendships within the church, guidelines for dating someone within the congregation for a single minister, self-care for ministers, and other related topics. We did not talk about "rules" (such as "no hugging"), but instead we focused on understanding the relationships a clergy-person has, what the power issues are within those relationships that may allow a minister to take advantage of others, and when one has inappropriate boundaries. For example, we learned that many ministers who commit misconduct or violate appropriate boundaries do not have adequate support through clergy friendships and supportive relationships with peers. The workshop included film interview segments from experienced and wise people both in Christian ministry and from other faiths, giving a

broad perspective on issues we have in common as we minister. Most or all participants were enthusiastic, and the workshop was well-received.

In its November meeting, the Brazos Association Church and Ministry Committee voted to require completion of Boundary Training equivalent to that of the Faith Trust Institute for our active ministers within three years of our meeting. We are including in that requirement retired ministers who serve churches in an ongoing way as, for example, interim pastors, but not for those retired ministers who do occasional supply preaching. The Committee believes that this training will be of real benefit to our pastors, we noted that many churches have insurance that require pastors to have it (and it is likely more companies will require it), many other denominations and other Associations in the UCC require it, and our practice of having pastors trained in this way can help build trust between our churches and their communities. There are plans to offer the training the day before the South Central Conference Annual Meeting (an all day training), and we will find a way to offer it also at a time when our ministers who need a weekend workshop can attend. We know some of our ministers have already had the equivalent training elsewhere, and ask that those people contact us to let us know what training you have had so we can be sure it does meet the requirement. We ask pastors who have questions or concerns to contact the Church and Ministry Committee as soon as possible so we can address these and work with you.

Cheryl von Ehrenkrook's training was underwritten by the United Church Insurance Board at a cost of several hundred dollars. Cheryl uses her skills and training to assist Douglas Anders and the South Central Conference without pay. Slumber Falls, and especially Director Charles Stark, helped make us comfortable and well-fed at low cost. This training was supported generously in many ways.

As I close, I ask for prayers for Professor Whit Bodman of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, one of our UCC Association Ministers, whose father died recently Chapel Hill, NC.

Save the date for our Spring Brazos Association meeting at St. John's UCC in Burton on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> at 3 pm though dinner.

Blessings in Christ, Liz Nash



Dear Fellow Members,

*A word of acknowledgement of your recent recognition of the new window that honors my time in the church. It's hard for me to adequately express my thanks, except to say that I'll always treasure the generosity & graciousness that you've extended me. And I know that Mary & our family share this appreciation.*

*I feel as though I'm firmly imbedded in a milieu of virtual saints. With sincere love & gratitude, --Mathis*

The Congregational Church of Austin  
408 West Twenty-Third Street  
Austin, Texas 78705-5214

**Return Service Requested**

## **Deadline for April VISITOR — March 21**

**We are changing the way we do refreshments for fellowship hour**



### **Refreshments**

#### **FELLOWSHIP HOUR HOSTS:**

We are changing the way we do refreshments for fellowship hour. There will be two sign-ups instead of one. One will be to sign up to bring "goodies" and the other will be to clean up. "Goodies" should be just a little snack to go with coffee and punch. This does NOT need to be elaborate. Please consider signing-up to clean-up, it will help tremendously and won't take long if the "goodies" are modest. Thank you!