

THE VISITOR

The Congregational Church of Austin United Church of Christ

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Rev. Thomas J. VandeStadt

Rev. John Towery, Pastor Emeritus

The question is never *whether* there is a God, or *whether* we should love God, but as Derrida says in quoting Augustine *what do I love when I love my God?* What is being loved in my bottomless love of God, in the bottomless God I love, in the bottomless name I call the love of God?

John Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 115

In the kingdom, it is the outsiders who are in, just the sort who would empty a room full of respectable types, who would send realtor's sales signs shooting up all over what Kierkegaard called Christendom...In the kingdom, the mark of God is on the face of the stranger, on the "other," not the "same." In the biblical tradition, God is not the object of a speculative mysticism that sweeps us up into an eternal now where we are one with the One, but the one who comes knocking on our door dressed in rags in search of bread and a cold cup of water.

John Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 262-263

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

The Gospel According to Matthew 25: 35; 40

On Christmas day, we fed around one hundred and ten people who showed up at our door, people who were hungry, thirsty, cold, and seeking hospitality from strangers with open hearts. To the homeless folks who walked through our door, we were strangers. To us, they were strangers. To each, the other was the "other."

Before the meal, a number of us celebrated the birth of Jesus with a brief worship service in our sanctuary that included Holy Communion. In this service, homeless folks outnumbered members of our church. What did it mean to celebrate Holy Communion—holy union with—Christ and the homeless *other*? And were we inviting homeless folks into the church, or were they inviting us into the kingdom of God?

If outsiders are already in the kingdom of God, then who's inviting who? Were we extending a call, or responding to a call? Did we open a door, or was a door opened to us? We can drive ourselves crazy with this line of questioning. Can we really answer such questions with theological precision? Perhaps they simply point us to an event that occurs when hearts open and a great divide separating human beings is bridged by the loving concern that marks authentic hospitality. Within this encounter, all participants are drawn into the kingdom of God, at least for the time the event lasts, time we may characterize as holy.

John Caputo asks via Jacques Derrida and St. Augustine, what do I love when I love my God? For Caputo, the most profound answer is the "other." To homeless folks, we're the "other." To us, they are. But on Christmas day, for an hour or two, we tasted a bit of the kingdom of God together. Through Christ, we found ourselves rubbing shoulders, making eye contact, and smiling at one another in holy time and space. We experienced great joy in offering and receiving a banquet meal. For some of us perhaps, this was our way of expressing our love for God, and feeling God's love for us.

I'd like to thank everyone who contributed to making our Christmas Open Door Dinner such a wonderful event this year. Thanks to all who donated funds, brought in food, and helped set-up, serve, and clean up. The turkey, pecan pie, and all the rest tasted delicious, but what we tasted in our hearts was beyond compare. Let's pray that through Christ, we may continue to seek ways to be in holy union with homeless folks in our community.

PRE-LENT BOOK READING

Insurrection, by Peter Rollins

In preparation for Lent (can you believe we're already talking about Lent?) I invite you to read and then join me in discussing Peter Rollin's most recent book, *Insurrection*. In this book, Rollins reflects on Jesus' words from the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" In Rollin's view, Christians are not called to simply remember and commemorate Jesus' crucifixion on the cross, but to experience the agonizing abandonment that Jesus experienced on the cross. Passing through this threshold of abandonment, this crisis in faith and meaning, opens up the possibility for a new experience of God through resurrection.

Continued on page 2

Here are a few excerpts from the book:

To participate in the Crucifixion is to experience the breaking apart of the various mythologies we use to construct and make sense of our world. The Crucifixion experience is nothing less than the taking place of the Real. It is the incoming of that which cannot be contained in our various mythologies, that which ruptures them and calls them into question.

All religions have adherents who profoundly experience the loss of meaning, and all religions offer varying explanations for this. Some speak of it representing a test, others claim that it is a result of sin, and still others say that it comes from an inability to grasp the bigger picture because of our humanity. But here Christianity offers a fundamentally different response: This loss is not an experience one has in relation to one's faith, but rather is a central expression of one's faith. It is not something one feels toward Christianity; when one feels this loss, one stands fundamentally *within* Christianity. Rollins, *Insurrection*, 23-24

While in the Garden of Gethsemane we witness the sacrifice for religion, on the Cross we come face to face with the sacrifice of religion. In the sacrifice for religion, Christ loses everything for God, while in the sacrifice of religion, Christ loses everything *including* God.

Let me be more specific: What is lost here is a way of relating to God as *deus ex machina*, as some being "out there" who ensures life makes sense. On the Cross, Christ becomes the absolute outsider. Everything that has supported him thus far has been stripped away. The religious system of the day sought his execution, the political system happily provided it, and his social circle quickly abandoned him. All that would ground him had been fundamentally shaken apart. There is no support here for Christ. On the Cross he is left naked, alone, dying.

Rollins, *Insurrection*, 27

While Rollins' book isn't dense or filled with philosophical and theological jargon, it is nevertheless challenging. Not everyone will agree with him, but some may resonate powerfully with the *experience* he describes—the agonizing loss of meaning, the painful outgrowing of beliefs and theologies, the existential faith crisis, and the new life that can follow. The book is available on-line, at some local bookstores, and on Kindle. If you'd like to read it, please do so in time to meet for discussion after worship on February 12 and 19.

Tom

Micah 6 Combined Worship on Jan. 15, 2012

The Annual Combined Worship for Micah 6 Austin and its member congregations will be **January 15, 2012 at 3:00 p.m.** at **St. Austin's Church** at 2026 Guadalupe St. Light refreshments will follow the service.

Free parking is available at these locations:

- church parking behind the church and between the alley and San Antonio street - we encourage you to leave these spots available for guests with limited mobility.
- parking under the gym at the corner of 20th and San Antonio streets and the parking facility at the corner of MLK and San Antonio streets.

Please mark this event on your calendars and help celebrate another year of good work and the fellowship of faith communities working together to help those in need!



Matt Blackstock welcomed Rev. Mark Thomas and his wife to church on Sunday, Dec. 11. Mark was ordained in our church in 1974 under the pastorate of Rev. John Towery. They are in town for the next few months.

Church Leadership

Trustees Chair	Jaime Hadley	Financial Secretary	Pam Tucker
Deacons Chair	Joe McMillan	Clerk	Betty Bodman
Christian Outreach Chair	Bill Beardall	Historian	Whit Bodman
Moderator	Reuel Nash	Web mistress	Sara Ross
Treasurer	David Ross		

Personals by Pat Oakes

Sunday, December 18, was a bittersweet day in the life of our church. The day started with the lighting of the last **Advent** candle in a service filled with song and wonderful music, eager children, and the amazing **Joyful Noise Orchestra**. The multi-generational eleven member ensemble featured **Jaime Hadley** and **Fran Briggs** on clarinet, **Giovanni Fracasso** on violin, **Sara Ross** on viola, **Katie Lemley** and **Colin Ferguson** on cello, **Megan Goff** on bass, **Emily Howicz** on flute, **Dave Ross** on recorder, **Jonathan Geer** on piano, **Rambie Briggs** on accordion, with **Nodie Murphy** conducting. The Sunday school children, directed by teacher Robynne Heymans, did a wonderful job with their spirited presentation of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" at the conclusion of the service. Among those participating were **Savanna and Harrison Tucker**, **Juliet and Scarlett Quisenberry**, **Isabella, John**, and **Francesca Dietz**, and **Tess Howicz**.



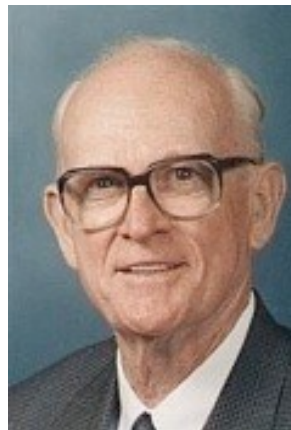
Michael Fracasso and Lisa and Sarah Kirch enjoyed visiting at church on Sunday, Dec. 18



The Joyful Noise Orchestra led by Nodie Murphy performed during the church service on Dec. 18.



Megan Goff on bass as a part of the Joyful Noise Orchestra on Sunday, Dec. 18. Cathy Hubbs, Don Mlles, and Bill Howe in the foreground.



Ben White

May 23, 1923 - Dec. 9, 2011

The difficult and sad part of the day was when most of us attended **Ben White's** memorial service at 3 p.m. Due to the expected large crowd, the service was held at **University Christian Church** and officiated by **Tom**. Ben was a longtime and very active member of our church, a worker for good in the community, both in his work as a pediatrician, and also in his activism for a number of excellent causes. Three people from the church, **Mel Oakes**, **Matt Blackstotck** and **Bill Beardall** gave eulogies. His life was beautifully outlined by his son, **Cappy**, and celebrated by his son **Carl**, while granddaughter **Maya** played a moving selection on the piano. Ben lived 88 good years and was in remarkable health for all of his life until the past few months. He last played tennis in late June and had exploratory surgery in the fall when they found lung cancer (he never smoked). Ben opted to do nothing and met death with grace and dignity. He will be so missed by all of us.

Folks had time to get home for a brief rest and then gathered again at the church for the lovely carol service (thanks to **Jaime Hadley** for putting candles in the church windows just as **Hildegard Everett** used to do) and the annual Christmas open house at the home of **Pat and Mel Oakes**. Special guests at the open house were **Ned Murphy** (newly graduated from basic training in Georgia and on his way to further training in upstate New York) and



From left: Debbie Appel Knowlton, Sara Ross, Cheryl Appel, Vic and Betty Appel.

and his wife Faye. Also at the party were Debbie Appel Knowlton and Cheryl Appel who were in town for an early Christmas visit with Vic (doing better after a bout with pneumonia early in the month) and his wife Betty. Spotted at the carol service were Heather Cole and her husband Jeff Thomas, who married in September and are delightfully expecting a baby girl in late May.



Bill Beardall was only looking for the Westlake post office and driving through the parking lot just off Bee Caves Road, when he hit a slick patch and went flying. No one

came to his aid, he picked himself up and dusted himself off—and rode home. By early evening he knew he was in trouble because he was in pain and the ankle was swelling. A trip to the emergency room confirmed what he already knew. Then there was the surgery, the installation of a plate and a number of screws in the ankle. Ask him to show you the X-rays which he has on his cell phone!

Betty and Whit Bodman had a family-filled Christmas. All of Betty's family came—three from Colorado (Betty's sister **Amy** and her family), two from Florida (Betty's brother **Jay** and his wife **Nancy**). Their mom **Florence** was delighted to have all her "kids" here for Christmas. Betty and Whit's daughter **Elizabeth** came with her fiancé, **Greg Matthews**, who got a crash course on the two-step, barbecue, and warm Christmases. Whit bemoaned the fact that there was not enough water in the lake for an introduction to sailing. **Greg**, who is from the **Philadelphia** area near where Betty's great-grandparents lived had never been to Texas. He is an engineer, working with architects on construction sites.

Felicia and Eliot Scott cannot believe how fast their time in Austin is flying by. Eliot is finishing his Master's in May and the kids are growing and thriving. **Skye** is loving her bilingual kindergarten class and 3 year old **Sterling** is having a great time soaking up knowledge like a sponge. Felicia is enjoying teaching on-line but is sorry that she won't be able to go on the **El Salvador Mission Trip** this year. She went last year with several members from our church and had a marvelous and uplifting time.

Yoshi (retired pastor of this church) and his wife **Setsuko Kaneda** are enjoying life in **San Diego**. Yoshi has been very involved with a mission appeal for the United Church of Christ at their home church in San Diego and, in addition to exceeding the goals set by the church and the national organization, received recognition from **U.S. Representative Bob Filner** and **U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein** for this work. A really special honor was awarded to Yoshi when he was given Pastor Emeritus status at the Congregational meeting of his church, **Pioneer Ocean View UCC**. It is quite unusual to give that title to a former pastor who did not retire from the active ministry at their local church.

Mary Sinclair and Richard Jackson have had a good year with numerous trips from their home in **Heidelberg, Ontario**. Mary had a wonderful trip to see an old friend in **New South Wales** and Richard made a visit to family in **England**. They both enjoyed a family reunion in the Chicago area and also went three times to the **Stratford Festival** (the largest classical repertory theater in North America), just a half hour from their home. They were also in

Old-timers at the church will remember **Dennis and Kazuko Schneider** and their daughter **Takako** who were members back in the mid 1970s. They have lived in Japan for many years. Takako attended college in the states and married **Robert Spevak** several years ago. Their son



Dennis, Kazuko, and Takako Schneider in 1984

Kade was born on March 31, 2011, which was Takako's 37th birthday. The Spevaks made the trip to Japan for their son's christening. Sadly, **Kazuko** has early onset Alzheimer's and was not able to participate in the service, but-



Dennis Schneider, Takako Schneider Spevak (holding the christening dress), Kade and Robert Spevak.

Dennis was thrilled to have his grandson, Kade Taira Schenider Spevak, christened at his home church in Tokyo. Kade wore his mom **Takako's** christening dress, the same dress she wore when she was christened by **John Towery** in Austin 37 years ago.

It was a wonderful treat to see **Jim and Mona Maser** at the church on Christmas morning Jim and Mona are living 5 in San Antonio now, so we don't see them very often.



From left: Mona and Jim Maser with Nodie Murphy

David and Edith Scott (who were at the church in the mid-1980s for a year) with their two children, are doing well at their home near **Glasgow, Scotland**. Son **David** bought his first apartment in **Aberdeen** and is enjoying his work. Daughter **Sarah** is the mother of two young children and lives nearby, which is a great joy to all. David and Edith had a marvelous trip to **Barcelona, Sicily, Corfu, Athens, and Istanbul** this fall and are looking forward to a week in Portugal in January.

It was old home week at the Christmas morning service. We were all delighted to see **Paul Deisler** visiting from **Corpus Christi** with his daughter **Julie**.



From left: Dave Ross, Liz Nash, Paul Deisler and daughter Julie.

Doyal and Tommie Pinkard are pleased to announce the birth of their grandson, **Will Pinkard**, son of **Chris and Rizza Pinkard**, in California on Christmas Eve morning, weighing in at 9 pounds and 5 ounces. More details will follow in the February *Visitor*.

Brazos Association News

January 2012

by Liz Nash

The **Church and Ministry Committee** of the Brazos Association, at its November meeting, voted to recommend **Beth Gleason** for ordination pending call and to receive **Ken Ingram** as a Member in Discernment (In Care). Beth is a member of Congregational Church of Austin. She has been a very active and involved part of the church, growing up Catholic, starting her journey toward ordination as a Methodist, then coming into the United Church of Christ. Her seminary training has been at **Seminary of the Southwest and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary**. She served her internship at Church of the Savior with **Mary Wilson** as her supervisor. Beth's **Ecclesiastical Council** will be at the coming spring Brazos Association meeting. Before that time, her ordination paper will be sent to Association churches. We encourage all who are coming to the spring meeting to read her paper beforehand. You will get an opportunity to get to know Beth, to have her speak to the Association meeting, and to ask questions before voting on whether to approve her for ordination pending call.

Ken Ingram, a member of United Christian Church in Austin, has recently moved to the Austin area from Colorado, where he lived in Denver and Colorado Springs. Ken completed his seminary training at **Iliff School of Theology** in Denver. He has also done work in chaplaincy training in **Clinical Pastoral Education**, and he is continuing this work at **Seton Medical Center** in Austin. We look forward to getting to know him here and to working with him as he continues preparing for ordination.

The South Central Conference is holding its first Clergy Retreat in a number of years at **Slumber Falls** this January 30-31 at Slumber Falls Camp. The speaker will be **Felix Carrion, Coordinator of StillSpeaking Ministries** of the national United Church of Christ. He will preach and share about how our churches can have a more dynamic and faithful ministry in Christ. The retreat will give time for fellowship with colleagues, time for relaxation at Slumber Falls, worship, and plenty for our pastors for bring back to churches to enrich their ministry. We hope, if your minister(s) can come, that our churches will support and encourage them for a renewing time together.

Douglas Anders, our **South Central Conference Minister**, has just returned from a two week trip to India as part of a **UCC Conference Ministers and Wider Church Ministries Board** pilgrimage to India. The trip allowed these representatives of the UCC to visit with and represent us in support of the ministries that partner with our

Global Ministries around the world. The UCC, through UCC Wider Church Ministries, does our mission partner work jointly with the **Christian Church/Disciples of Christ** in our common Global Ministries. On this trip, the group visited, worshiped with, learned about, and acted as our presence with different mission partners in India each day. Douglas was able, for example, to visit the **Family Village Farm in Katpandi**, where some of our Conference and Brazos Association churches sponsor children through the UCC Child Sponsorship program. To learn about the trip and get a sense of the magnificent ministries we partner with in India (and just to be inspired), read the daily blog written by the delegation members at <http://globalministries.org/news/sasia/journey-india-1.html>

A couple of reminders:

The **UCC National Youth Event**, an outstanding opportunity for our youth, will be at Purdue University July 10-13. Some Association scholarship money will be available for our youth. For details about the event and registration, see <http://www.ucc.org/calendar/national-youth-event-2012.html> Our spring **Brazos Association meeting** will be **Sunday, April 22**, at **Friends Congregational Church in College Station**.

Blessings in Christ,
Liz Nash
Brazos Association Minister

Micah 6 Youth Drop In Center Volunteers and Furnishings Needed

We are still looking for volunteers to act as hosts for our Street Youth drop in center, to be opening on **January 22**. The center will be at **University Baptist Church** from 2-6 each Sunday. We aim to have volunteers work in teams of 4 once each month on a flexible schedule. We will provide a welcome, hospitality, and serve dinner for our guests. **Will Hancock**, director of the *LifeWorks* drop in and services at our church, will offer training on Sunday afternoon, January 8th. Also, we also still need donations of computers, flat screen monitors, microwave ovens, and a large blender. We encourage you to join in this outreach to our homeless youth neighbors by volunteering or donating. Contact **Liz Nash** if you are interested or need more information: 231-0045 (home), 799-2782 (cell), lizknash@gmail.com.

Year End Report Austin Interfaith Victory Pages

A newsletter on the successes of Austin Interfaith member institutions

Building Communities, Developing Leaders

The central work of Austin Interfaith (AI) is the development of leaders and institutions. But how does this look in action? One example is 50 leaders gathering at Travis Heights Elementary School for a neighborhood walk, organized as part of the Innovation School Project (a partnership with Education Austin). They went door-to-door engaging people in conversations about hopes and concerns for their neighborhood and school. Leaders held conversations with 200 people, and left invitations to a community meeting at 500 doors. This is one of many ways AI leaders break down the isolation so many people face; in doing so they help build strong schools, congregations and unions. This year, leaders and organizers have held more than 1,500 individual meetings, engaged more than 2,000 people in house meeting conversations and trained 300 leaders in organizing.

Expanding Our Reach, Amplifying Our Voice

In the past two years, 10 new institutions have joined the organization representing a 30% increase in membership. The organization has also grown financially. In addition to increased dues from member institutions and funding from foundations, AI's Money Campaign secured over \$50,000 in corporate investment and grassroots funding just this year. This spring, 800 leaders gathered at St. Ignatius Church, gaining commitments from state, city and school board officials on issues like living wages, immigration and education which resulted in many of the victories stated. This event inaugurated an impressive Get Out the Vote campaign, aimed at building one of the largest voting blocks in the city. And leaders delivered these voters to the polls: in the general election, on average, AI's target precincts either maintained or increased turnout, compared to a decline in participation citywide. During the last two days of the city council runoff election alone, leaders reached over 1,500 households through door-to-door block walking and phone banking. In the election, supporters of the AI agenda were 2.33 times more likely to vote than the average registered voter.

Major Victories

Austin Interfaith and the Texas IAF rescued the Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) Fund in the Texas State Legislature:

-Initially being zeroed out in the state budget, JET fund was restored to \$5,000,000 for the next 2 years.

Capital IDEA funding approved and increased by City of Austin:

-AI leaders saved Capital IDEA from being zeroed out of city funding. Rather than losing all funding as staff propos-

als initially recommended, AI leaders fought and not only restored funding but won an increase, totaling 1.2 million for FY2012. Additionally, the contract was approved for the next 3 years.

Travis County funding for Capital IDEA increased by \$97,787:

-Travis County now invests \$800,000 in Capital IDEA, funding the long-term job training of 160 students, an increase of 20 students from their previous contract.

Eliminated artificial limits to public participation at City Hall:

-Leaders successfully lobbied council members to reverse an anti-lobbying ordinance that prohibited private citizens and citizens' organizations like Austin Interfaith from meeting face-to-face with city council members and city workers about social service programs. This reversal now allows citizens of Austin to meet with council members on programs funded through Public Health and Human Services.

Restored City funding for "Prime Time" afterschool:

-Austin Independent School District afterschool enrichment programs for Title I students funded by the city was initially cut in the city budget. However, AI leaders were able to garner support to restore funding (over \$650,000, serving 25 schools).

Pre-kindergarten maintained in AISD:

-AI and allies saved all-day free pre-kindergarten for Title I students in AISD after the funding from the state was zeroed out. District officials directed \$6,000,000 to sustain the program, which serves all children living in poverty.

Incorporated anti-poverty job training program into Austin Community College (ACC):

-Capital IDEA "VIP Sessions" with counselors and peers are now treated as a course. ACC now receives reimbursement from the state to help defray costs.

Helped defeat anti-immigrant legislation:

-AI leaders, clergy, and Central Texas Bishops held a press conference during the legislative session to oppose the Arizona-style "Sanctuary City" anti-immigrant bill. It was killed in the final days of the legislative session.

Partnered with the Travis County Sheriff to protect immigrants and residents:

-Trained over a dozen leaders to be a voice for residents who believe they have been wrongfully arrested. Leaders will be advocates and advisors for affected families and liaisons to the Sheriff's office.

Central Health responds to AI leaders:

-Leaders collaborated with the health district, formed a clinic advisory board, and advocated for increased health-

Return Service Requested

Deadline for February Visitor - Jan. 23

Year End Report *continued from page 7*

care access in the 78744 neighborhood of Austin. In October 2010 an increase of \$800,000 was allocated for the clinic. Their budget increased again this year to fund expanded services. (Leaders also trained to assist families in their communities with Chip/Medicaid health care registration.)

City requires just wages for construction workers:

-At the urging of AI and allies in regard to a \$4.3 million subsidy by the City of Austin to White Lodging Services Corp. to build a convention center hotel, City Council required the company to pay all its construction workers the prevailing wage for their industry.

Council members pass resolution for worker safety:

-After gaining commitments from council members at AI's 800 person accountability session, leaders from the Workers Defense Project worked to pass a city resolution that will protect and train workers on all city-owned construction sites, whether or not a third-party is the developer. In addition to 10-hours of safety training, the resolution will also require that a safety supervisor with 30 hours of training be present at construction sites.

Submitted by Marilyn Vaché



Part of the cooking crew for Christmas Day dinner for the homeless. From left: Greg Futch, Tom Vandestadt, Cecile Adam, Christy Kuhner, Dennis Murphy, and Olivia Vaché.

Our annual Christmas Day dinner was well attended, with **Greg Futch, Tom Vandestadt, Cecile Adam, Christy Kuhner, Dennis Murphy, Jaime Hadley and Marilyn and Olivia Vaché** and others who were on hand to help serve. **Barbara Burnham** played the piano at the carol and communion service prior the Christmas feast. Over 120 people were served, with the line extending onto San Antonio Street!