

# THE VISITOR

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

408 West Twenty-third Street, Austin, Texas 78705-5214

(512) 472-2370 Fax: (512) 472-1175

E-mail: ucausti@swbell.net    Web site: congregationalchurchofaustin.org

**Rev. Thomas J. VandeStadt**



**O**n **March 5, 2015**, the **State of Texas** may kill an innocent man for a crime he did not commit. The State is scheduled to execute **Rodney Reed**, after finding him guilty of murdering **Stacy Stites** in 1996. However, many believe Mr. Reed did not receive a fair trial, and evidence exists that could prove his innocence. Regardless of one's stance on the death penalty, it is clear that when evidence indicates the very real possibility of a convicted person's innocence, the death sentence should be forestalled and the evidence carefully studied. The case of Rodney Reed touches not only on the issue of the death penalty, but on the integrity and fairness of our judicial system and its ability to judge innocence and guilt.

**The Campaign to End the Death Penalty** has asked me, along with other faith leaders, to write to **Governor Abbott**, and to ask the Governor to grant Rodney Reed clemency. I have done so and I have included my letter below. The Campaign will also be holding a press conference, possibly on February 14, and I may be participating in that as well. If you would like to learn more about Rodney Reed's case, please go to <http://www.nodeathpenalty.org/> I also encourage you to write to Governor Abbot if you feel so inclined.

Dear Governor Abbott,

In your Inaugural Address to the people of Texas, you highlighted your Christian faith. Citing Paul's Letter to the Romans, you described your faith as the source of inspiration and strength that helps you persevere through times of trial and tribulation. Citing Matthew's Gospel, you drew attention to Jesus' teaching that with God, all things are possible.

I'm writing to ask you to draw on your faith now and to persevere with due diligence in the pursuit of justice and truth by granting clemency to Texas Death Row prisoner, Rodney Reed, whom the State of Texas is scheduled to kill on March 5, 2015. The evidence points to the very real possibility that Mr. Reed did not commit the crime for which he was convicted. If Mr. Reed is innocent, and if the State of Texas does kill him, then the State of Texas—and all the citizens for whom it acts, including you and me—will be guilty of the gravest of crimes: killing an innocent man.

As you know, Mr. Reed was convicted of the 1996 murder of Stacey Stites in Bastrop, Texas, and his conviction was based on semen DNA evidence. However, no other physical evidence linked him to the murder, and Mr. Reed has maintained that he and Ms. Stites were having an affair, which accounted for the presence of his DNA.

Due to inadequate representation and prosecutorial misconduct, Mr. Reed did not get a fair trial, even though his very life was at stake. His trial included hidden eyewitness testimony, misleading expert witness testimony, and the failure of the defense to call either an alibi witness or multiple witnesses that could have testified to the affair between Mr. Reed and Ms. Stites.

Since Mr. Reed's trial, investigators have uncovered evidence that points to Ms. Stites' then-fiancée and former **Giddings** police officer **Jimmy Fennell, Jr.** as the perpetrator of this crime. Mr. Fennell failed two polygraph tests on the question of whether he strangled Ms. Stites. Witness testimony and DNA evidence collected at the site where Ms.

Sites was found point to the involvement of Mr. Fennell's known associates. Mr. Fennell is currently in prison for sexually assaulting a woman in his custody while policing in Georgetown, Texas.

Mr. Reed is pursuing new DNA testing on several crucial pieces of evidence—including the belt with which Stacey was strangled—that have never been tested for DNA. These tests could very well prove Mr. Reed's innocence. Mr. Reed is also pursuing a new state appeal based on changed medical testimony about the DNA that convicted him, testimony that could also prove his innocence.

New laws passed in the last two legislative sessions concerning DNA testing in Texas speak to the importance of both pre- and post-conviction testing. In 2013, when you served the State of Texas as Attorney General, you supported a bill for pre-conviction DNA testing, saying, "Texans may disagree about the death penalty, but one thing all Texans can and should agree upon is that no innocent person should be executed in Texas." Governor Abbott, I call on you to stand by these words today

The God for whom all things are possible is the God who commands truth and justice, the God who commands that we do all in our power to ensure that we do not kill an innocent man for a crime he did not commit. It is still possible to ensure that truth and justice prevail in the case of Rodney Reed by insisting on the full disclosure of the evidence pertaining to Stacy Stites' murder. As Governor, you have the power to make this possible. Please use your power by granting clemency to Rodney Reed.

Sincerely,

Rev. Tom VandeStadt  
Congregational Church of Austin, United Church of Christ

---

### A Joyful Theology— Adult Education Sessions Begin on April 19th

Most of you know our own **Rev. Dr. Van Herd**, our shared **Minister of Adult Education**, whom we are sharing with UCC and UBC. Van will be returning to lead a series of classes here at CCA beginning **Sunday, April 19th at 12:30 p.m.** In addition to having pastored UCC churches, Van is now an **Associate Research Scientist** and **Reactor Operator in Nuclear Engineering** at **The University of Texas at Austin**, and also is a Lecturer in Mathematics, as well as in History of Science.

Plan now to be a part of these special sessions exploring the relationships among science, technology, and the Christian faith, using **Sara Maitland's** transformational book, *A Joyful Theology: Creation, Commitment and an Awesome God*. Van has already begun this series with our ecumenical partner, **University Christian Church**, and the study has been received there with great enthusiasm by the adult classes that have been marked by high attendance and great interest.

The author, **Sara Maitland**, is the spouse of a **Church of England** vicar and is rooted in a scientific family. She herself is an artist, poet, and novelist, who writes with imagination, creativity, and conviction her vision of the awe-inspiring interconnectivity of science and theology. Those

interested may visit her website: [http://www.saramaitland.com/about\\_me.html/](http://www.saramaitland.com/about_me.html/).

Make plans now to join us for this transformational study!

#### Church Leadership

Trustees Chair	John Goff
Deacons Chair	Jaime Hadley
Outreach Team	Reuel Nash & Warinda Harris
Moderator	Barbara Burnham & Bill Beardall
Treasurer	Gail Christeson
Financial Secretary	Pam Tucker
Christian Education	Rachel Dietz
Coordinators	Van Herd
Clerk	Betty Bodman
Historian	Pat Oakes
Web mistress	Sara Ross

## Personals

by Pat Oakes

Sunday, January 18th, was a day of celebration at the church, a day of remembrance for **John and Eleanor Towery**. **Warinda Harris**, a new member, had commented when John's death was announced the Sunday after Thanksgiving, that none of the newer members knew much about John and Eleanor and wondered how she could learn more. That planted a seed with the Deacons and a plan developed to have a Sunday at the church to honor John and Eleanor which included inviting the Towerery "kids" (**Ches, Sally**—who came in on the way from Boston for the occasion, and **Mary**) and other family members in the area. Cousins **Krystal Towery** and **Ricky Masters** lit the candles at the beginning of the service and put them out at the end, and **Nodie Murphy** gave a wonderful children's sermon teaching the children one of Eleanor's favorites Sunday school songs—"Zaccheus Was a Wee Little Man." The entire congregation joined in, complete with the hand motions. The choir sang a lovely anthem of one of John's favorite hymns, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." **Pastor Tom** preached a short sermon on John's character of openness and welcoming,

**Dennis Murphy** shared a moving "moving" story (how John came three days straight to help the Murphys move when they had just been at the church for a few months), **Dave Ross** spoke about John's coming to visit with him and Sara and asking them if they were sure they were not joining the church too precipitously (Dave and Sara assured him that they weren't!). **Marilyn Gaddis** talked about John's involvement with students both here in Austin at UT and Huston-Tillotson, and in San Marcos at Southwest Texas State. **Fran Briggs** talked about John's work with the **Brazos** Association and his ecumenical work (speaking both for herself and for **Frank Dietz** who could not be there), and **Pat Oakes** read a laudatory statement from **Regina Rogoff**, the CEO of **People's Community Clinic** which John was instrumental in starting in 1970 by giving the fledgling staff the basement of the church to use. Pat closed by inviting folks to check out the on-line material on John and Eleanor at our church web site (<http://congregationalchurchofaustin.org/>) and encouraging folks to look at the slide show in the fellowship hall of the Towerys through the years. The Deacons put on a delicious coffee hour for a time of renewal and making new acquaintances.



John Towery Remembrance Sunday on Jan. 18th at church  
Back row: Krystal, Maggie, and Ches Towery, Sally Towery Johnson, Danny and Mary Towery Masters, Kendra, Benjamin, and KC Towery; Front row: Monica, Clara, Agnes, and Ricky Masters.



John Towery Remembrance Sunday at church.  
Danny and Ricky Masters with Kathleen Strong after coffee hour.

The church welcomed a new member on Sunday, January 11th. **Loren Stell** has been worshipping with us for the past several months. He has most recently been in **New York** but was born in **Texas**. He has worked as a journalist for **Newsweek**, **Time**, and **Look** magazines (covering Selma, Vietnam, Watts and more), and worked as a communications officer at the **National Council of Churches** eventually heading **Ecumedia News Service**, which provided weekly radio news features from a number of different religious traditions. He trained as a pastoral counselor, became a certified psychoanalyst and practiced

## Brazos Association News

February

by Liz Nash

I am writing this newsletter article to the churches who have been part of the **Brazos Association** up to this point. In the next month or two, I will expand where I send this article to include our new brothers and sisters.

On **Saturday, January 17th**, the South Texas Association met at **Faith UCC** in New Braunfels and voted unanimously, by written ballot, to dissolve and request to merge with the Brazos Association. Because the Brazos Association had voted at our fall meeting to accept all South Texas Association churches pending a merger request, we are now one Association. That's something to celebrate! All South Texas churches (except **Faith United** in Woodsboro church, a joint **Methodist-UCC** church that does not generally participate in UCC meetings) were represented. Several had gone through a process of discussing the merger at length within their congregations to give their delegates clear direction in voting. The discussion at the meeting was constructive, with several questions and a good spirit. We discussed issues of distance, possibilities for a new name that fits the expanded Association, and the upcoming work of putting together committees, bylaws, and budget.

Now, we are a larger body. The South Texas churches who are joining this Association are **Bethany Congregational UCC** in San Antonio, **Community UCC** in San Antonio, **Faith UCC** in New Braunfels, **Friedens Church UCC** in **Geronimo (Seguin area)**, **Trinity UCC** in Niederwald, **Redeemer Zuehl UCC** in Marion, **St. Paul UCC** in Lockhart, **St. Paul UCC** in Corpus Christi, and **Faith United Church** in Woodsboro. St. Paul Corpus Christi is petitioning the Houston Association to join there, since Houston is closer to Corpus Christi than most of the churches in our longtime Brazos churches. Corpus Christi folks were at the meeting, and we discussed how to support them in making this change.

We are also a larger body in area, with the churches that will remain part of the Association and active in it extending from the San Antonio area to Bryan/College Station and Washington. However, with a little time spent on Google Maps, I have discovered that our driving times have extended approximately a half hour for the churches 4

most distant from each other. Our new churches do not extend the distances as much as it appeared at first.

As our two sets of Association leadership work on the "nuts and bolts" of making us one, let's support them with prayer, with open hearts, and with the knowledge that, together, we can be stronger in mission and faithful covenant as we follow Christ together.

**On Sunday, March 22nd, 4 pm through dinner, we will celebrate our newly merged Association and begin to get to know one another at the Brazos Association Spring Meeting at Evangelical Church, Lyons.** Plan to come and join the time of friendship, worship, discussion of our new covenantal relationship, and the possibilities of faithful ministry together.



The "staff" of the Triple Dog Dare You house concert  
Colin Ferguson, Amy Harris, Jonathan Geer, Reuel, Annie, Liz,  
and Becky Nash, Becky's boyfriend from Maine, Jesse Whitehouse,  
and Rev. Charles Stark, director of Slumber Falls Camp.

for over thirty years. He was ordained at **UCC's Riverside Church** and led one of their "house" churches for several years. He has also explored the **Quaker, Kabalistic, and Benedictine** traditions. He moved back to Texas two years ago after he met writer/poet **Kathleen Hall** at a poetry festival in **Florida** and followed her back to Lake Travis.



Janet Parsons welcoming new member Loren Stell at coffee hour.

**Tom and Alex VandeStadt** went to the **Austin Animal Center** for a new dog while Alex was home from school for Christmas break. Their philosophy in the endeavor was: they don't choose the dog, the dog chooses them. An 11-month black lab mix chose them by lavishing them with love and affection. When asked the name he preferred, he said "**Captain Hastings**", after **Hercule Poirot's** faithful assistant. After being in his new home for a few weeks now, **Hastings** feels he chose the right people.



Cap't Hastings, Tom and Alex's new dog.



Our wonderful **Nancy Brown** will celebrate her **95th** birthday on February 16th. Please help her celebrate by sending her a card at 3905 Carmel Drive, Austin, TX 78721-1215—or give her a call at 512-926-1892. After Nancy stopped driving, **Don and Sharon** Brown faithfully brought her to church on communion Sundays until just a few months ago when

Nancy decided it was just too much. While she doesn't come to church anymore, we miss her and certainly understand. She loves staying connected, so do drop her a line or give her a call. **Ches, Sally, and Mary** all send their greetings as they have fond memories of her from when they were children growing up in the church.

**Joe McMillan** has finally moved back into his house which had to be almost completely gutted and restored after years of water and mold damage. He moved back in in early January and is working on getting everything resettled. The cats stayed in the house the whole time the work was going on and are quite delighted to have things getting back to normal. We hope to see Joe back at church soon.

Three gifted musicians and fifteen hardy souls braved the chills of January to warm up **Reuel** and Liz Nash's home with beautiful music on **Sunday, January 11th**. The house concert was in support of Slumber Falls Camp and **Rev. Charles Stark** was on hand to share SFC slides and camp plans for 2015. The buffet by "chef" **Reuel Nash** was fabulous - everyone was well fed in body and soul - and indeed, it was a special evening for our church family. Many thanks to those who donated without being able to attend the concert hosted by **Beth Gleason** and **Liz & Reuel Nash**. The goal had been to raise \$1000, but the total amount raised was more than \$1700—bravo, brava! See you at **Slumber Falls** this summer! (See photo on page 4). For a link to a video of the **Slumber Falls House Concert** held at Reuel and Liz Nash's house in January, [click here](#).

**Rev. Bob Breihan** celebrated his **90th** birthday on January 11th with a big party at **University United Methodist Church**. Organized by his wife, **Rev. Sarah Bentley** (who has served as our interim pastor several times over the past 25 years), there were family and friends from far and wide

to help with the celebration. Bob has long served the Austin community as a pastor, community leader, and counselor.



Sarah Bentley saying nice things about her husband Bob Breihan on the occasion of Bob's 90th birthday .

**Betty Phillips** is recuperating from recent shoulder surgery. **Bill Phillips** says, "Right now, Betty still is without a 'wing' and I am treading softly with a fused right foot. Driving has become problematic, though our daughters **Katy** and **Stephanie** have come to our rescue. Betty has begun home therapy visits three times a week to restore the strength and agility of her right shoulder. We have about three more weeks to go before Betty gets into the good stuff and goes for several months of out-patient therapy. By then, we both hope to be back on the road. My right foot feels fine, but I am still trying to acquire the necessary touch to make the gas pedal on our car behave the way that it is supposed to. We are grateful for the good doctors and care workers who have accelerated our progress." Betty says that her X-rays look good and she is just waiting for the soft tissue to heal. While recognizing that she has a lot of PT to go, she has been told she can start limited driving and is hoping that they can resume a few outside activities like church, book club, concerts, and basic shopping.



Our retiring office manager, Kathy Whatley.

Kathy Whatley, our wonderful church office manager for the past four years, will be retiring at the end of March. Kathy says that she has very much enjoyed her time with us—but that she is looking forward to more time to travel with her recently retired husband. She has done a great job with *The Visitor* which is much appreciated by me. She is also planning to volunteer for our **Porch Lunch Ministry** starting in April.



Janet Parsons with her daughter Antonia and her son Adrian at the beach in Destin, Florida.

**Janet Parsons** met 20 of her family members in Destin, Florida, the week after Christmas. They had an amazing week of fun, food, casino games, music, running on the beach, flying kites, and even a couple of Disney movies. They stayed in a cozy three story house with six bedrooms and five bathrooms, just a few yards from the beach. The group included three of her siblings, their respective children, her older brother's three grandchildren, and three small fluffy dogs. Even though it was cool and overcast, they had a marvelous time. One morning they had the obligatory group photos on the beach, and this one of Janet and her children is one of her favorites.

**Ruth Koenig** doesn't travel much these days but she does get to play with her twin great-granddaughters who live here in Austin. **Lottie** and **Thea** turned two in November and are the children of **Brett Koenig Greig** and **Travis Greig** (who was one of Pat Oakes' 6th graders a number of years ago). Brett moved here several years ago and was followed here by her folks, **John and Barbara Koenig**--and then by Ruth—and we are so glad she came!



Ruth Koenig with her darling twin great-granddaughters Charlotte (Lottie) on the left and Dorothea (Thea) on the right.

**Lisa Kirch** reports that her daughter **Sarah's** in her second semester at **SAIC**, the **School of the Art Institute** of Chicago, and she's happy. In January, she was halfway through a two week course in Siena. She apparently discovered right away that, no, she would not be sitting in a classroom the entire time, because on her second day she sent Lisa a photo of Siena Cathedral. Lisa did not hear from her for a while, maybe because Lisa's response was something along the lines of "I told you so." The other news is that, at long last, someone is working towards founding a UCC church here in the Shoals (near Sheffield, Alabama). Lisa has thought about this for a couple of years but never got beyond looking up the procedure on the UCC website. They were to meet for the first time in mid-January. There's support for the effort coming from outside, and Lisa says they need "y'all's" prayers and good wishes, too.

**Mel and Pat Oakes** enjoyed a marvelous five-day post-Christmas holiday in **Vicksburg, Mississippi**, Mel's home town. Daughters **Beth** and **Sarah** decided it was high time that Beth and **Eugene's** daughter **Emily**, 14, and son **Ethan**, 11 got to hear Grampa tell the stories of how and where he grew up. Youngest daughter **Mardie** and her

family could not come because of Mardie's work obligations. There were 28 Oakes relatives for the first night's dinner at the lovely antebellum home, now a bed and breakfast/restaurant, **Anchuca**. On other days they toured the **Vicksburg National Military Park**, visited old friends who have an amazing Christmas village set up in their home, toured **Natchez**, drove as far as they could to get near **Satartia**, where Mel's dad was born, found some cotton bolls for the kids to enjoy, ate wonderful food, paid their respects at the cemetery to family, and went by what used to be **Oakes Auto Parts** where Mel and his brothers and sister grew up. Emily and Ethan loved their first experience in the South with Emily really understanding the concept of Southern hospitality and Ethan declaring that he wanted to learn to "talk Southern."



Eugene Buck and Beth Oakes, Emily and Ethan Buck, Mel and Pat Oakes, Joe Pierce and Sarah Oakes in Vicksburg, MS, after a delicious dinner at Anchuca.

**Suzanne Vanderpoel** had an exciting reason to watch the recent inauguration of our new governor. Her grandson **Ty Hemphill**, a mechanical engineering senior at **Texas A & M** and also a member of the **Ross Volunteers**, the official honor guard to the governor, learned that they were going to be part of the inaugural festivities and he called his grandmother to tell her. The Ross Volunteers formed the saber arch for the governor at the south entrance of the Capitol at the swearing-in, marched in the parade, and they were also part of the inaugural ball. Ty was very busy trying to work all of this in to a few days as he has just started a paid internship with **Valero** in **Port Arthur** (he will graduate in December, 2015). He made it from Port Arthur to College Station, College Station to Austin, and then back to Port Arthur via College Station in a little over 30 hours. Suzanne watched everything by live-streaming the event while she was at the **North Village Library**. She was sorry that no members so the family could be there in person, but she did catch glimpses of Ty on television as he performed his duties. A day to remember for grandmother and grandson!

The Congregational Church of Austin  
408 West 23rd Street  
Austin, Texas 78705-5214

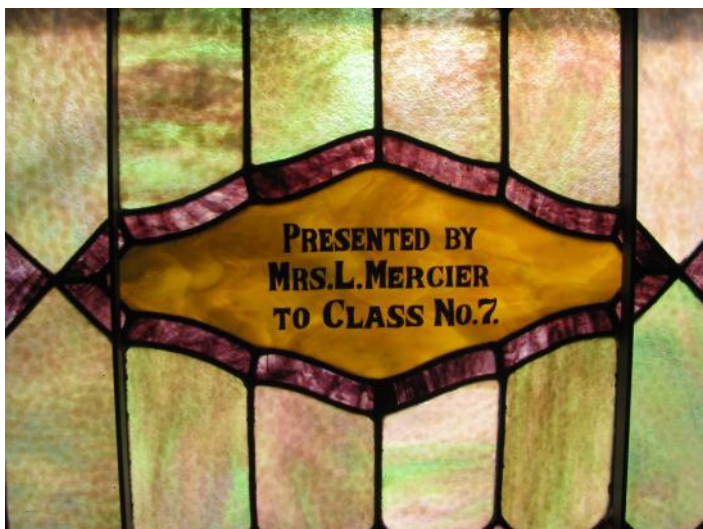
**Return Service Requested**

## Deadline March Visitor—Feb. 23rd

### History Corner

The fifth window from the front on the choir side of the church reads "Presented by Mrs. L. Mercier to Class #7." Typical for the day, the initial "L." is that of her husband, Louis. He was born in Canada and emigrated to the U.S. when he was quite young. Mrs.

formation about their connection to the church, but we do know she was a Sunday school teacher for Class #7. The church was incorporated in 1901 and the original church building Ninth and Colorado was completed about 1906.



Medallion of the stained glass window on the choir side reads "presented by Mrs. L. Mercier to Class #7."



### AMAZON Smile

Do you shop on Amazon? Amazon will donate 0.5% of the price of your eligible AmazonSmile purchases to our church whenever you shop on AmazonSmile. Learn more here: <http://smile.amazon.com/ch/74-6106423>

Thanks!  
Gail Christeson, Treasurer  
Congregational Church of Austin, United Church of Christ

Mercier was born Virginia ("Virgie") A. Peck in 1860 in Pennsylvania. Her family moved to Austin in 1870. Virginia and Louis were married in Austin about 1881. By 1891, he was the owner of a grocery store at Sixth and Colorado (See the ad at the end of this article). Their home was at **96 Red River** and they and their daughter lived there for many years. We are still searching for more in-