

DECEMBER 2017

# The CONGREGATIONALIST

Magazine of the Congregational Way since 1849

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Quiet  
Day

PILGRIM  
TOUR

Meeting  
Jesus

INTERFAITH  
DIALOGUE

Congregationalism  
and the  
American  
Mosaic

HAPPY  
LIFE



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The CONGREGATIONALIST  
Magazine of the Congregational Way since 1849

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### EDITORIAL STATEMENT

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We reserve freedom of expression to our authors and freedom of opinion to our readers.

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Neither *The Congregationalist* nor the NACCC has a creed or holds positions on social or theological issues; but we recognize the authority of each local church to do so for itself, if and as it wishes, and we encourage thoughtful and respectful discussion of our agreements and differences.



Christmas 2017

As I get older, it seems that the celebration of Christmas comes around more and more quickly every year. When I was a child, the days between Thanksgiving and Christmas seem to take an eternity to pass. Now, I feel like Christmas 2016 was just last month and not a year ago.

To help me savor and treasure the days of the Advent and Christmas seasons, I have tried to be more reflective on the season. Toward that end, I have embraced the use of poetry to help me be in the proper spirit and the right frame of mind.

Recently, I discovered this piece written by G. K. Chesterton. In many ways, he was a larger than life character. To say that he was a writer of some renown is to belittle his work. What I had not known was that he composed this poem, A Christmas Carol, written in 1900. For the musically inclined among us, it has been set to music and can, thus, be experienced in another way.

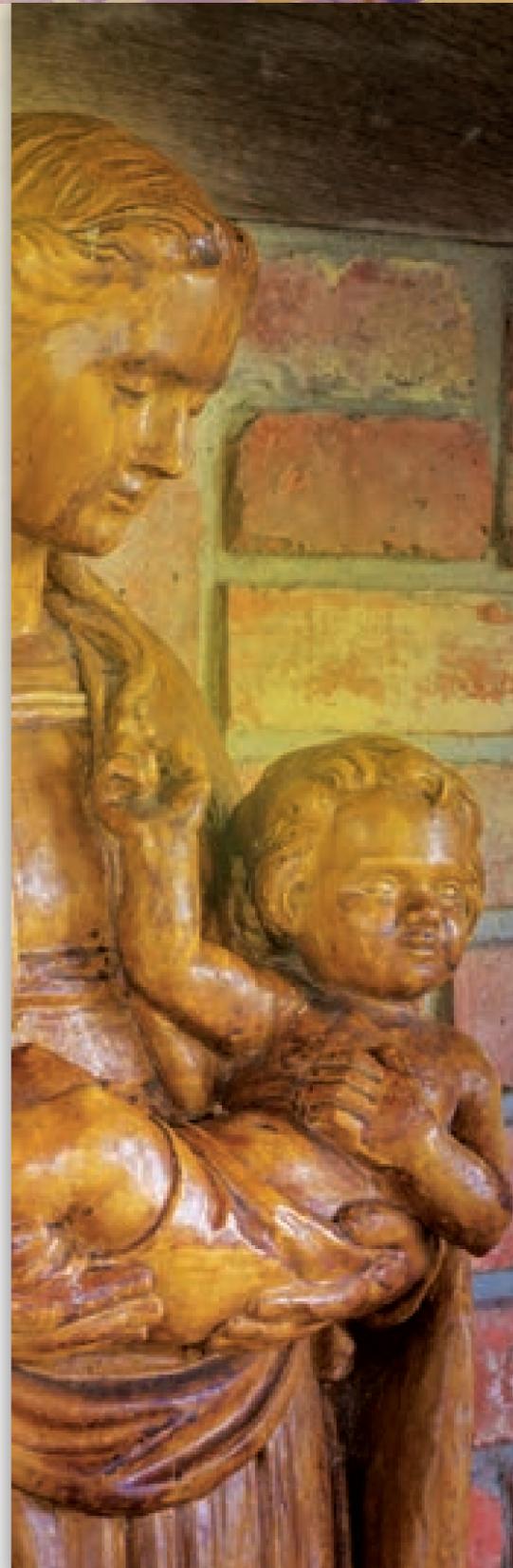
A Christmas Carol by G. K. Chesterton

The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,  
His hair was like a light.  
(O weary, weary were the world,  
But here is all alright.)  
The Christ-child lay on Mary's breast  
His hair was like a star.  
(O stern and cunning are the kings,  
But here the true hearts are.  
The Christ-child lay on Mary's heart,  
His hair was like a fire.  
(O weary, weary is the world,  
But here the world's desire.)  
The Christ-child stood on Mary's knee,  
His hair was like a crown,  
And all the flowers looked up at Him,  
And all the stars looked down.

May you be blessed by reflecting upon and re-discovering the presence of the Christ-child during this season of Advent and Christmas.

Grace and Peace, Michael

By Michael Chittum,  
Executive Director



Rev. Antoinette Brown  
(1825-1921)

Antoinette Brown was the first woman ever to be ordained to Christian ministry.<sup>233</sup> She was born in 1825. When she was five years old, her father, Joseph Brown, became a Christian at one of Charles Finney's revivals, and Antoinette herself became a believer and joined a Congregational church four years later.

She entered Oberlin College in 1845. At Oberlin, she met the famous feminist and abolitionist Lucy Stone, and they became lifelong friends. During school vacations, she taught school and studied Hebrew and Greek. After graduating in 1848, she began studying for the ministry. Her family did not support this ambition. Her parents disapproved, and so did her brother William, who was a pastor.

When Antoinette wrote a paper reinterpreting Paul's statement that apparently forbade women from speaking in church, it was printed in the Oberlin Quarterly Review. However, the school officials did their best to discourage her. They told her that she might reasonably plan to become a missionary, but not a pastor.<sup>234</sup> She was ostracized from the society of her all male classmates, and her professors mostly ignored her. Antoinette completed her studies at Oberlin in 1850, but granting a theological degree to a woman was seen as inappropriate, and she was not given the degree and not allowed to participate in the commencement ceremony.

Charles Finney encouraged Antoinette to speak publicly, and she gave public lectures for three years after finishing her studies. She also wrote for Frederick Douglass's newspaper, The North Star, and she spoke at the National Women's

Rights Convention in 1850. Unlike many other "progressive" thinkers of her time, Antoinette opposed the evolutionary theory advanced by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Unlike many other crusaders for women's rights, she was adamantly opposed to divorce.

Finally, in 1853, Antoinette was called to First Congregational Church of Butler and Savannah in Wayne County, New York, for an annual salary of three hundred dollars. (Even though the dollar was worth much more in those days, this was still a very small amount of money.) Because the church building was too small and a large crowd wanted to attend, Antoinette was ordained on September 15, 1853, in a Baptist church building. A Methodist minister, Rev. Luther Lee, who had previously been opposed to ordaining women, preached her ordination sermon, and his text was Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus").

Antoinette's ministry in New York was short-lived. She was much more liberal in her theology than most of her church members were. She resigned her pastorate in July 1854. She moved to New York City and did social work. She wrote articles on social issues for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune. In 1856, she married Samuel Blackwell, moved to New Jersey, and accepted the occasional invitation to preach in various liberal churches.<sup>235</sup> Antoinette and Samuel had seven children, but two died in infancy.

Antoinette returned to public life eventually, again attending the National Women's Rights Convention in 1860 and being one of the founders of the

American Woman Suffrage Association in 1869. (Oberlin College, by the way, finally thought better of its refusal of a degree to Antoinette Brown Blackwell, and in 1878 she was awarded the master of arts. Thirty years after that, Oberlin would give her the honorary degree of doctor of divinity.)

Antoinette returned to the ministry in 1878, but this time as a Unitarian minister. She founded All Souls Unitarian Church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and she served as that church's pastor for forty-three years, until her death. Antoinette Brown Blackwell lived long enough finally to be able to vote. In 1920, she reported that she had voted for Warren G. Harding for President. She died the following year, at age ninety-six.

233 Von Rohr, 274.

234 W. T. Keeffe, "Women in the Pastoral Ministry," *The Congregationalist*, October 1982, 6, in Larson.

235 Hartley, lecture notes.

Adapted and reprinted with permission from *The Congregational Minute* by Robert Hellam, (Seaside, Calif., Robert Hellam, 2012.)

## Rain Damages First Congregational Church In Detroit

**O**n This past August, heavy rains caused part of the façade of First Congregational Church to come crashing down. Restoration work on the historic Detroit church began almost immediately following the collapse.

Those who attended the NACCC 2016 Annual Meeting in Detroit were privileged to visit the church, which helped enslaved people on the underground railroad escape across the Detroit River to Canada and

freedom. An iconic sight, the 125-year-old building features Byzantine and Romanesque architecture and a Victorian interior. The congregation had already



*Detroit's First Congregational Church is an iconic site on Woodward Ave.*

repaired and replaced the roof, the boilers and some of the stained glass prior to this recent calamity. To support the restoration project, donate to [gofundme.com/friendsoffirst](http://gofundme.com/friendsoffirst)

## Audience Learns About The Sikh Faith At FCC Tosa

**M**embers of Greater Milwaukee's Sikh faith presented "Primer on Sikhism" to an interested crowd at First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa, Wis., this past July. The session, which was open to the public, was part of the church's Community Through Understanding Program, which encourages interfaith

partnerships, supports diversity, and advances the interests of commonality in all human endeavors.

Mr. Upinder Singh and others from the Brookfield Gurdwara addressed the history, beliefs, and practices of the Sikh faith and answered questions from the audience.

*Submitted by Jim Santelle, First Congregational Church*



*Presenters from a nearby Sikh temple invited members of First Congregational Church and the public to visit the temple. Photo by Barry W. Szymanski*



*Pastor Stu Merkel*

## Congratulations, Pastor Stu Merkel

**T**he Reverend Dr. Stuart Merkel, Senior Pastor at Faith Community Church in Franklin, Wis., was awarded Second Place in the Plpit.com 2017 Purpose and Cosmos competition. Pastor Stu submitted his sermon from May 7, 2017 -- "The Science of Faith and Purpose" -- on Colossians 3:12-17. The sermon was videotaped by church member Kurt Hoefert for submission. The award comes with a gift for Pastor Stu and a \$400 gift to the church.

The contest recognizes sermons written on the subject of Science, Faith, and Purpose. Plpit.com, a ministry of Fuller Theological Seminary, seeks to support ministers who want to bring science into their sermons. Pastor Stu has submitted other sermons. He hopes to write a future sermon on the subject of forgiveness and science. An audio version of the awarded sermon is available at <http://www.faithcc.us/the-science-of-faith-and-purpose-pastor-stu-merkel/>

## Taste Of Soquel Is Another Success

**T**he 9th Annual "Taste of Soquel! Food and Music for the Common Good" seemed just a little sweeter this year: the music more toe tapping; the food bites a little tastier; the beer, wine, and cider offerings more refreshing; the KidZone more fun; everyone's favorite raffle the busiest yet, and the smiles brighter than ever! Even the work felt lighter and the benefits a little greater. Yes, we all felt it. We all commented on it. Something about the 9th Annual A Taste of Soquel was just a little sweeter this year!

Over 50 Soquel and area businesses (for a complete list go to [www.tasteofsoquel.org](http://www.tasteofsoquel.org)) contributed goods and services for Taste's popular raffle, which raised over \$2,000.00 of the proceeds. A Taste of Soquel is a project of the Congregational Church of Soquel and co-sponsored by the Capitola/Soquel Chamber of Commerce. Fun, fellowship, a little work, a lot of play, TOS 2017 had it all! Meals donated to Second Harvest? 46,800! That's a grand total of 296,848 healthy meals for families in

Santa Cruz County over the last nine years! For those of you who like to keep track in dollars, \$11,700 for TOS 2017, and a grand total of \$74,212 from nine years of A Taste of Soquel!

*Submitted by Laura Hamby*



*Ralph Anybody, DJ at KPIG radio, was emcee for the live music. Photo by Hillary Nicholson*



*Local wineries provided the libations at Taste of Soquel. Photo by Hillary Nicholson*



## Intersections International Names Rev. Julie Johnson Staples Executive Director

**I**ntersections International has announced that the Collegiate Church of New York has called the Reverend Julie Johnson Staples to serve as the organization's new executive director. She succeeds Intersections' founding director, the Rev. Robert Chase, who retired earlier this year.

A ministry of Collegiate Church, Intersections International serves as a catalyst to help disparate groups forge a common ground in global peace, justice, and reconciliation. Intersections is also a global, non-governmental organization with special consultative status at the United Nations.

"Social justice has played an integral role throughout Rev. Julie's distinguished and wide-ranging career as a journalist, global private equity executive, scholar, and minister," said Danita Branam, chair, governing board, Intersections International. "Our search committee found her blend of critical thinking, insight, ethics, passion, and eloquence, grounded in pragmatism, to be the embodiment of leadership essential in these times to evolve and advance Intersections' mission, as we move into our next chapter."

Under Rev. Johnson Staples' leadership, Intersections will embark upon a strategic planning process to identify additional areas for engagement alongside its core programs, which stand at the intersections of veterans and civilians; divided nations and peoples; artistic engagement and community values; and traditional religious beliefs and LGBTQ equality.

"We are at a time in our global history when a unified, mobilized and engaged population is essential to our health and prosperity," said Rev. Johnson Staples. "I look forward to expanding the reach of our LGBTQ programs to the global south, seeking new frontiers into which we will extend our peacemaking initiatives, and identifying new and compelling ways to use art to promote justice and dialogue. Our primary goal is to deliver inter-religious, multi-faith programming, and build a robust community of young and old, and energize geographically and economically diverse populations to fight for a better world."

Prior to joining Intersections, Rev. Johnson Staples served as interim senior minister of the Flatbush-Tompkins Congregational Church in Brooklyn, N.Y. She is a member of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches' national ambassador team and serves on the organization's board of directors.

*Submitted by Lisa Fels Davitt for Intersections International*

## Fcc Clarkston Experiences Growth Spurt

**O**n September 18, 2017, First Congregational Church of Clarkston, Michigan was very, very proud to welcome 30 new members into our congregation. After hugs and handshakes, we retired to our Fellowship Hall for cake and coffee to get better acquainted with our new members.

This celebration came just two weeks after our very successful 23rd Annual Labor Day Fair and Classic Car Show. The Reverend. Marty Hall, who presided over our Fair for years when he was our minister, told our new minister, Tim Chappell, that if he survived the Labor Day Fair he would be the pastor here for years to come.

Well, he did and we hope so!

*Submitted by Carolyn Mills, Year-Round Delegate*

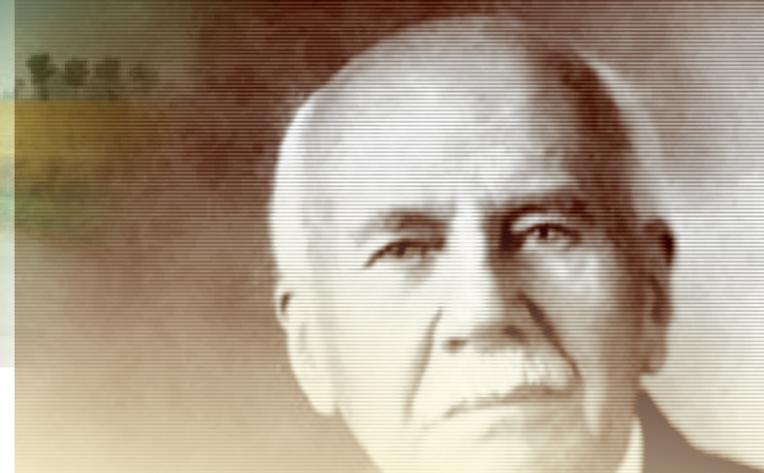


*FCC Clarkston's 30 new members gather in fellowship.*

## Hymnals Available

**I**f your NACCC-member church has been affected by recent flooding or another crisis and needs replacement hymnals, Arbor Grove Congregational Church in Jackson, Michigan, has around 100 copies each of the 1966 Methodist Hymnal (red cover) and the Pilgrim Hymnal (blue cover) we could donate to a church requiring assistance. If anyone is interested, please email Cathy Haldane at [secretary@arborgrovechurch.org](mailto:secretary@arborgrovechurch.org)

*Submitted by Cathy Haldane, Arbor Grove Congregational Church*



*Pastor Stu Merkel*

## Keeping A Legacy Alive

**I**n 1896, a worldwide movement began in the heart of America. While pastor of Central Congregational Church in Topeka, KS, the Rev. Dr. Charles M. Sheldon wrote a passionate sermon series, "In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?" This message, sparked an international campaign for Christians to ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" when faced with everyday decisions.

Rev. Sheldon also played a critical role in moving an entire nation toward social and racial equality. In 1893, Sheldon opened the first African American kindergarten west of the Mississippi in an area of Topeka known as "Tennessee Town." From that school, he mentored the father of the plaintiff's attorney for the landmark Supreme Court case, Brown vs. Board of Education, which found racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, a turning point for civil rights in America.

Behind his home in Topeka, Sheldon built a small garden study, where he wrote sermons, books, and peaceful propaganda with the goal of unifying the world. The Sheldon Study was relocated to the Old Prairie Town park, untouched and unrestored for the last 23 years. Shawnee County Parks and Recreation Foundation, along with Friends of Ward-Meade and Old Prairie Town at Ward-Meade Historic Site, have collaborated to preserve the legacy of Charles Monroe Sheldon.

A crowd-funding campaign with the intention of preserving this hidden gem has officially been launched through the National Recreation and Park Association, just one of 12 projects chosen to be highlighted at a national level. The goal is to raise \$350,000 to create a world-class Charles Monroe Sheldon museum and establish an endowment fund.

Please see our website: [www.SheldonsLegacyLives.com](http://www.SheldonsLegacyLives.com) for more information and to find out how you can help the project sponsors keep Sheldon's legacy alive! (A list of co-sponsors is available on the website.)

*Submitted by Teryl Studebaker - Sprout Communications, on behalf of Shawnee County Parks & Recreation Foundation*



# In Pilgrim's' Steps

*By Lawrence Bernier*

*NACCC is pleased to help bring you this exciting tour opportunity. The level of interest in the trip will assist us in developing the itinerary.*

*If you think you are likely to join us for the tour, please contact me at [mchittum@naccc.org](mailto:mchittum@naccc.org) so I can get a preliminary idea of how many we can expect.*

*Michael Chittum,  
NACCC Executive Director*

**I**n this day of modern conveniences, instant communication, extensive knowledge, and breakthroughs on many fronts, it is almost impossible to relate to an earlier time. A time when ignorance was rampant, and life was centered only on existence. The 17th century was a difficult time for faith, if ever there was an easy time for the faithful.

Even if you are not a history buff, at some point you likely reflect on your heritage and ancestry. We wonder where we came from and who has come before us, bringing us to this time and place. This is especially true within Congregational churches with our deep-seated roots in religious freedom, courage, and faith. Our religious tradition provided a foundational element in the formation of the United States of America; to understand our beginnings is to understand our church.

Most of us in the NACCC know the history of Congregationalism somewhat. We might not be able to recite dates, names, and places, but we do have a general idea of our beginnings and don't give it much more thought until Thanksgiving rolls around again and our thoughts return to Plymouth Colony and the first Thanksgiving.

You are being given a special opportunity to travel where the Pilgrims did, to walk in their very steps in their very own country. You will be able to experience where they lived and worshiped, while at the same time being guided through a historical account of what brought them to brave the dangerous waters of the Atlantic Ocean, with half of them dying in the process.

Under the auspices of Cruise Planners American Express and the Reverend Larry Bernier (a retired NACCC minister), we will leave from Boston, Massachusetts for London on September 20, 2018. We will spend a full day in London with a guided tour of the Tower of London, St Paul's Cathedral, and Westminster Abbey.

Next, we will travel to Nottinghamshire, with admission to Gainsborough Hall, home of William Hickman, an ardent Puritan and sympathetic to Separatists, and John Smyth. In addition, we will stop in Sturton le Steeple, birthplace of John Robinson, his wife, John Smyth, and John Carver.

Day five will include admission to the Mayflower Pilgrim Visitor Center in Redford with a historic lecture on the Pilgrim Fathers and/or Religious Tolerance. Next, on to Babworth, touring a historic church where the history of the Pilgrim Fathers began. Then it's on to Scrooby to visit Scrooby Manor and Brewster's home. We will end at Austerfield, the home of William Bradford.

Day six we transfer to Manchester Airport, with a stop in Epworth en route where we will take a guided tour of the Old Rectory, home of John and Susanna Wesley who began Methodism. Then on to Amsterdam.

Day seven includes a full-day tour of Leiden with admission to the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum.

Day eight we fly from Amsterdam to Boston.

Day nine we will tour Plymouth Plantation in Boston, which is a working historical museum with costumed characters of the era. We will also be presented with a guided tour of the Town of Plymouth including Plymouth Rock.

Breakfast is included each day, and we will be staying at four-star hotels for your pleasure and convenience. While travelling the English countryside in comfortable touring coaches, there will be commentary by experienced tour guides.

This engaging and educational trip through the land of the Pilgrims will be one to remember for years to come and will add meaning to your Sunday morning worship as you connect to our heritage in a very meaningful way.

The cost for this trip is only \$3124 per person, double occupancy, based on 100 people. Single occupancy available. Prices and schedule are subject to change. Contact Doreen Drew and Amy Wylie, the Travel Experts, at Cruise Planners American Express for complete details at 1-800-497-2129 or email [amy.wylie@cruiseplanners.com](mailto:amy.wylie@cruiseplanners.com). Website is [www.cleartravellnow.com](http://www.cleartravellnow.com).

This is clearly an opportunity to get closer to our heritage and come away with an increased appreciation for the Congregational Way. Here is hoping you can join us.

# News AND NEEDS of OUR Missions



Members of the NACCC group hold babies at Happy Life.

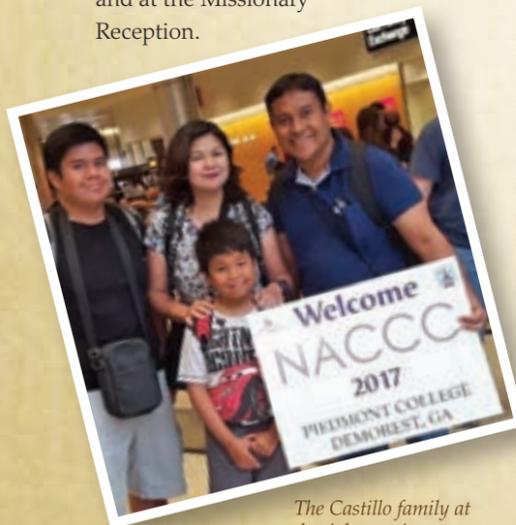


HLCH staff joins NACCC group for a photo

## Annual Meeting in Demorest, Georgia

There was a good representation of Missions at the NACCC 2017 Annual Meeting & Conference at Piedmont College.

Symphony John and his family from NACC – Philippines and Veranda Adkins, from Piney Woods School, Miss., were our invited missionaries. Jim and Sharon Powell, representing Happy Life Children's Home, Kenya; Juana Santos from Panamerican Institute, Mexico; Ida MacRae from Seafarer's Friend, Mass.; Charles Sagay from Mission School of Hope, Cameroon; Jim Owens of Love Worth Sharing, Haiti; Ella Smith and her assistant, Crystal Thompkins, from Morgan Scott Project, Tenn.; Julio Santana and Tony Goldman from Bread of Life Mission, Fla.; Richard Gossett of Indian Trails Mission, Ariz.; and Amanda Becker of Hosanna Industries, Penn. also attended. The NACCC delegates had a chance to meet and greet these missionaries throughout the conference and at the Missionary Reception.



The Castillo family at the Atlanta airport

## Hurricanes Prompt NACCC's One Great Hour of Sharing

The impact of this past fall's hurricane season is unprecedented and ongoing. The Mission and Outreach Ministry Council is collecting funds for Hurricanes Harvey and Irma relief. You can send funds to the NACCC office earmarked for the disaster relief effort to which it should be applied in the memo line. Funds will go directly to an appropriate services organization, such as an NACCC-member church or mission, to help provided much-needed assistance.

## Morgan Scott Project

Forty homes were made safer and warmer, thanks to the Morgan Scott Project, Tenn., which received a \$101,000 Senior Living Grant this year. The grant was provided for home repairs for seniors, as well as staffing and office equipment.

Morgan Scott hosted a one-day clinic for Remote Area Medical (RAM), which provides medical services, dental and vision care. The clinic helped 97 people with vision and dental care in a single day. Next year, they plan to host two

clinic days, one in March and another in October.

Ella Smith, director of Morgan Scott, will be a guest speaker at the Midwest Association of Congregational Christian Churches, in Tinley Park, Ill.

If your Regional Association would like a missionary to speak to your group, there are a few that would love to address your group. Please contact Linda at the NACCC Office for more information.



Home before improvements are made and after the work was completed

## Seafarer's Sunday

Ida MacRae of Seafarer's Friend, Mass. is putting together a program for the NACCC churches titled Seafarers Sunday. The mission will be introducing the materials shortly to help your church participate. This program allows you to celebrate Seafarer's Sunday

whenever and as often as it suits your church programs and activities. Program activities are designed for all age groups on Seafarers Sunday or leading up to it. For more information, please email: [director@seafarersfriend.com](mailto:director@seafarersfriend.com).

## Visit to Happy Life Children's Home (HLCH)

At the end of June, 10 people from NACCC churches went to visit HLCH, Kenya, for a week. Three people from the Congregational Church of Soquel, Calif., three from First Congregational Church of Maywood, Ill., and three from Heritage Congregational Church in Madison, Wisc., joined Linda Miller from the NACCC Office in gaining a better understanding of the services provided at Happy Life. There are 52 babies under two years of age at the Nairobi site. Lots of volunteers are needed to care for these children and provide them with love. Linda Miller noted that, as soon as she walked into the room, their small arms reached up, hoping to be held. A clinic is being built at the Nairobi site, so the

children have local access to health care. This clinic will be open to the public.

Kenya allows Kenyans only to adopt these children, so adoptions are few. HLCH become their guardians. Once the child turns two, they are sent to the home's second site, Juja Farm, about 10 miles out of the city. Here the children live in a family structure with a house mother. There are 52 children living here. They have a school on the property for the resident children as well as the neighborhood children. Currently, 150 children attend the school.

The group homes at Juja Farm have regular washing machines. So, the group from the Soquel, Calif. group challenged the Madison, Wis. contingent to see who could raise half the money for an industrial washing machine first. Together, the churches came up with

over \$3,000, with Madison submitting their donation to the office first, and Soquel exceeding the goal by several hundred dollars. The children and staff at Juja Farm are the big winners. They get a commercial washing machine!

The mission needs at least two more industrial washers. If your church would like to challenge another church, that would be terrific. We can post it in the News & Needs and The Congregationalist magazine. Santana and Tony Goldman from Bread of Life Mission, Fla.; and Richard Gossett of Indian Trails Mission, Ariz.; Amanda Becker of Hosanna Industries, Penn. also attended. The NACCC delegates had a chance to meet and greet these missionaries throughout the conference and at the Missionary Reception.

## New Initiatives at Piney Woods School

Piney Woods School, Miss, along with two AmeriCorps volunteers, is partnering with FoodCorps Mississippi and the National Center for Appropriate Technology to revise their farm, field-to-table, and composting programs. This will give students a hands-on experience in raising crops and using the food they raise in their dining room.

The 9th and 10th graders have received Chromebooks, which will enable students to access curriculum and projects online. The 11th and 12th graders use their personal laptops. Piney Woods has moved away from traditional text books and is moving toward a project-based curriculum. This will help students develop their critical thinking skills.

## Other Updates

*Panamerican Institute, Mexico*, has two new Board of Directors members: Emily Miller-Todd from First Congregational Church of Anaheim, Calif., and Mary Prendergast of Pilgrim Congregational Church of Pomona, Calif.

It is time to start thinking about Christmas in our mission fields. *Panamerican Institute, Mexico*, gives out Christmas baskets; *Morgan Scott Project, Tenn. and Bread of Life Mission, Fla.* distribute toys for kids; our missions in the *Philippines, Honduras, and Mexico* provide an extra month's salary to their pastors. All could use donations as the Advent approaches.

For more information on any of these missions, or to donate to any of the above projects, please contact Linda Miller at the NACCC Office, 800-262-1620, ext. 1618, or [lmiller@naccc.org](mailto:lmiller@naccc.org).

For a complete listing of NACCC Mission Projects, please go to our website: [www.naccc.org](http://www.naccc.org) and click on the Missions tab.

**Mission and Outreach Ministry Council**  
NACCC  
PO Box 288  
Oak Creek, WI 53154

## Prayers are Needed

Please keep all the travelers to the different missions in your prayers.

# THE CONTROVERSY *That Wasn't*

By the Reverend Dr. Robert Hellam

## Thoughts on Flags in Church

**W**hen I was a boy, it seemed that no matter what Protestant sanctuary you entered, up at the front were the U.S. Flag and the Christian flag. Until recently, this has been a feature in our own church's sanctuary, as well. I have long questioned whether this custom was appropriate, and I must have finally repeated my opinion on this topic once too often, because one day my younger son, a leader in his own congregation, exclaimed, "Dad, you're the pastor there! Stop talking about it, and if you feel that strongly, just remove the flags!"

So, in December 2016, I took the flags out of the sanctuary and put them away respectfully in another part of the building. I thought this might provoke dismay, or even anger. I was prepared to defend my actions. I intended to ask the people to consider what "planting the flag" means, and I planned to quote such Scriptures as Genesis 28:17; Exodus 3:5; II Kings 18:4; and Matthew 24:15. But there was no reaction to what I had done, it seemed. At least no one spoke to me about it, except my deacon (who merely wanted, apparently, to make sure the flags had been removed on purpose and not stolen).

By June 2017, however, Connie, my wife, informed me that the women of the church had been asking questions about the missing flags. So, I prepared a bulletin insert to explain my action, thinking that now that the issue was out in the open it would be addressed by the church's Executive Council, or a Congregational Meeting might have to be called. Here is the text of the bulletin insert:

Why are there flags in some churches? New churches being formed in our time generally do not even think of placing flags in their meeting places. It just doesn't occur to them. So why do older churches tend to follow that practice?

Secular public meeting places—school auditoriums, library conference rooms, post offices, convention centers, etc.—typically display the U.S. Flag, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. However, a church building is not just an ordinary public meeting place.

What is a church sanctuary? It is holy ground, a place set apart for the exaltation of God the Father, the glory of Jesus Christ, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Anything in that sacred space should be there only for the purpose of worship. Do flags contribute to the worship of God?

A church historian has said that the display of the U.S. Flag in churches as a common practice goes back only to the 1930's, the period just before World War II, when churches wanted to assure the government that they were not in sympathy with Nazism or Fascism or Communism.

But we know who we are. It is not necessary for us to prove who we are not. The Bible tells us that our true citizenship is in heaven, not in any earthly nation. Although the Bible does command Christians to be good citizens, it nowhere tells us to place national symbols in our church buildings.

All Congregationalists should remember where we came from. Our movement began because the English government owned the Church of England (and the queen of England is still the legal head of that church, even today). All English subjects were automatically by law members of the Church of England, and they were not allowed to worship anywhere but in a building belonging to the Church of England. They were also forced by the government to pay tithes to the Church of England.

Because our Congregationalist forebears refused to worship in the Church of England and resisted paying tithes to a church that they did not believe in, they were severely persecuted. Many of them escaped persecution by coming to America, and that is why we are here today.

Up to the present time in England, the only church buildings that display the national flag are those that belong to the government-owned denomination, the Church of England. The "dissenting churches" in England, or "non-conforming churches," as they are also called (Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, etc.), do not display the national flag in their sanctuaries.

In view of that, it is hard to see why any Congregational church in any country would display that country's flag in its meeting house.

What about the Christian flag? That goes back only to 1897, and it was originally intended exclusively for the churches that are traditionally called "Protestant," to distinguish them from the Roman Catholic Church or from the Eastern Orthodox churches. (That flag has been semi-officially adopted by the National Council of Churches, but our association does not belong to the National Council of Churches.) Again, we know who we are. Therefore, we do not have to prove who we are not. And as Congregationalists we believe that we are in fellowship with all true Christian congregations, no matter the denominational label on their buildings.

It is very probable that in a generation or two, few or no American churches will display flags in their sanctuaries.

As always with bulletin inserts, some people read it and some didn't. But no one said a word to me about it. This turned out not to be the controversy that I had anticipated it to be. I am wondering whether this issue has come up in any other Congregational churches.



*The Rev. Dr. Robert Hellam is senior pastor at Church of the Oaks in Del Rey Oaks, California. In addition, he served as a chaplain (captain) with the California State Military Reserve from 2011 through 2015 (with prior active duty as an enlisted man in the U.S. Navy). Bob earned his BA in English and his teaching credential from San José State University, his Master of Divinity degree from Western Seminary, and the Doctor of Ministry degree from Trinity Theological Seminary. Bob is a member of the Monterey Bay Colony of the Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Nims Family Association, the Plapp Family Association, and American Legion Post 591. He lives in Seaside, California, with his wife, Connie.*

# THE CHALLENGE

## of the Incarnation to Interfaith Dialogue: A New Approach

By John Tamilio III, Ph.D.

### I: Introduction

Our world is becoming smaller, due, in part, to our corner of it becoming more diverse. Many of us come into contact with people of different races, ethnicities, and faiths every day. To some, the latter is as a challenge to (and to others an opportunity for) interfaith dialogue. How is Christianity to relate to a culture that is becoming increasingly pluralistic? This question has vexed interfaith theologians for a long time. In this article, I will explore the traditional models for interfaith relations while showing how the Incarnation must determine the Christian approach.

### II: Exclusivism and Pluralism

Three models that explicate the relationship between Christianity and other faiths are traditionally offered: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The second one will be discussed after the former and the latter.

Christian exclusivists claim that salvation is attained through Christ alone. Some exclusivists are more specific than others. Some say, quite generally, that you need to believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Others will offer specific formulae, such as “You must accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior in order to be saved.” In either case, exclusivists maintain that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. John 14:6 is the proof-text. In it Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Between 1920 and 1950, this was the position of many of the giants of Christian theology. “Christianity alone, [Karl] Barth claims, points to the reality of grace as present in God’s unique revelation in and through Christ, and it is this reality alone that allows Christianity to claim to be the true religion.” Nowadays, this position is held by more conservative, fundamentalist, and evangelical believers and is shunned as being ignorant (at best) and dangerous (at worst) by many mainline theologians.

Pluralism lies on the other end of the continuum. Pluralists believe that other faiths are legitimate ways to God in and of themselves. Christianity does not corner the market on salvation.

The standard metaphor employed by pluralists is that every religion is a different path up the same mountain, but they all arrive at the same summit. S. Mark Heim challenges this metaphor in his book *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* by claiming that each religion is actually a different path up a different mountain. Heim’s contention is predicated on the reality that the telos (or end goal) of different religions are not identical. We devalue their rich uniqueness when we assume that they are. While the Christian desires salvation the Buddhist seeks Enlightenment. Is there a generic god at the mountain summit that embodies both? Does the Jannah and Jahannam of Islam coexist with the Hindu concept of reincarnation? How many gods are there on that mountaintop?

The problem with pluralism is that it can easily devolve into a lowest common denominator religion, although that is not the objective of its staunch proponents. The latter seek the validation of all faiths — as did the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II — as well as mutual understanding. While the latter is a noble endeavor especially in an increasingly hostile world, to claim that all religions are virtually the same is to reject the uniqueness of diverse faiths. It is also to dismiss the often dissimilar doctrines they profess.

But there is another problem as well — one that is unique to Christianity. The quandary has to do with the Incarnation.

### III: Inclusivism and Incarnation

I am not suggesting that the Incarnation is problematic the way that Arius did in the third and fourth century AD/CE. In order to uncover the difficulty that the Incarnation poses, we must first unpack inclusivism.

The standard Christian inclusivist argument is that Jesus is the way to God as he claimed. However, other faiths are legitimate ways to God because Jesus is at work in their religions whether their adherents recognize this or not. For example, if you are a Hindu, you are saved by Jesus. You may never have even heard of Jesus. That does not matter. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner coined the term “anonymous Christians” to signify such people.

But the question remains: how does Jesus save such people? My contention is that the unique, salvific work of Christ is inseparable from the Incarnation, which, in turn, poses an ontological challenge to religious pluralism. In other words, who is the God/god at the top of the traditional pluralist mountain? For the Christian, there is only one God — and that God became incarnate in Jesus. Furthermore, the presence of Christ is eternal. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Father/Creator God (the first member of the Godhead) never existed without the Son (the second member of the Godhead). These two entities cannot be parsed. Merrill Tenney writes that

the Greek term for Word (logos) is used “to indicate that Jesus had universal rather than local significance...He was preexistence, involved in the act of creation.”

The God at the top of the proverbial mountain is none other than the God of Israel, the God who is one with Christ. The Incarnation makes a nonspecific god to which all religions aspire impossible. To suggest otherwise is to posit this more generic deity at a pinnacle higher than the Triune God.

This is not to suggest that only Christians are saved. Soteriology is a different subject. However, if all people are saved by God it must be through an inclusivist purview. The Incarnation, if it is true, leaves room for little else.

### IV: Interfaith Dialogue

Most contemporary mainline theologians claim that the point of interfaith dialogue is not conversion, but mutual understanding. I concur. I also agree with Hans Küng who, reflecting on our need for a global ethic, claims that “the credibility of all religions, including the smaller ones, will in future depend on their putting more stress on what unites them and less on what divides them.”

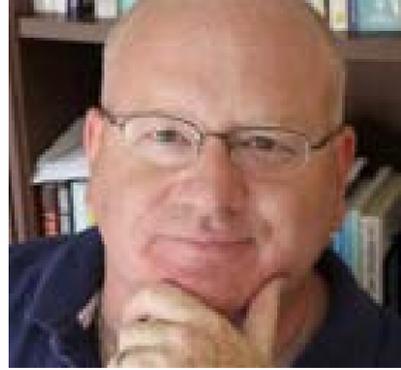
But the need for dialogue does not mean that we are to construct a lowest common denominator religion nor does it suggest that Christianity must sacrifice what it holds sacred. That Christological

sanctity begins with the Incarnation and is a fundamental aspect of the identity of God — the One who is always Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus is a peacemaker. He works for a deep, radical peace that carries love across the secured boundaries of the religious tradition. Ironically, it is the radical love that Jesus brings that produces the sword of broken relationships. Jesus is not the one who seeks broken relationships—it is those who are too afraid to let go of their power, their security, their familiar structures. The religious leaders in power are blinded by their security and what they have always known, and they do not see the love of God in the flesh before them. They initiate the rejection and slander of Jesus out of their fear of change.

Jesus, the love of God become flesh, did not serve fear or the false peace of the familiar way things had always been. Jesus was not afraid to shake up the status quo to serve and love a neighbor in need.

John Tamilio III, Ph.D. is the Pastor of the Congregational Church of Canton (Massachusetts). He is also a Visiting Associate Professor of Philosophy at Salem State University and Gordon College. Dr. John (as his parishioners call him) is a newly elected member of NACCC Growth Ministry Council.



# CONGREGATIONALISM and the *American Mosaic*

By The Reverend Alicia Riedy

**I**s the Spirit calling our churches to make changes in the increasingly diverse mosaic that is America?

I love attending the annual NACCC gathering. This year it was in Demerest, Georgia. I stopped in a CVS drug store in Cornelia near my hotel to pick up some items I had forgotten. I was near the front of the store when I overheard two men speaking in Spanish. I couldn't help myself and I chuckled thinking "we are everywhere, except in the church."

Although non-Hispanic whites currently make up around 62 percent of

the US population, by 2044 the Census Bureau predicts that "no one racial or ethnic group will dominate the [nation] in terms of size." Among U.S. children and teens, this change will occur sooner, around 2020.

Today's America is more a mosaic than a melting pot, suggests Gary Weaver, a professor at American University: "In a mosaic or a tapestry, each color is distinct and adds to the overall beauty of the object. If you remove one piece from the mosaic or one thread from the tapestry, you destroy it."

In this cultural moment, should the

American church hear a call to examine, again, the extent to which it does and doesn't value racial and ethnic diversity?

"Christians should be the first to get upset when they see something purporting to be a reflection of the world that's absent of diversity," writes film critic Chris Williams in his blog. "We shouldn't tolerate it in our own congregations, and we should speak about it whenever we see it elsewhere, even with something as seemingly trivial as the Oscars."

As Christians we worship the God who delights in diversity. "O Lord," the

psalm-singer exults, "how manifold are your works!" (Psalm 104:24, NRSV). The human race is one of God's astonishingly diverse works both scientifically and theologically. Growing up Mexican and Catholic I always loved the story of our Lady of Guadalupe. If you've never seen a picture of her please do so. The indigenous people of Mexico relate to her because she looks like them. Perhaps that diversity is part of what being created in the image of God means, since God is diverse in God's own self.

Although we can experience God in diverse ways, we believe we meet God most fully in Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Palestinian Jew who, though fully human, was very different from modern Americans, especially those who are privileged and comfortable. He paid attention to and valued those his society overlooked and undervalued, promising them the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3-10; Luke 6:20-26). Who do we overlook and undervalue in our churches?

I believe that the first step towards including diversity in our churches is to introduce new elements into worship, prayer, music, even the way we do sacraments. Church can and should be a leader in bringing people together across the lines that divide us. If this is going to happen, it will mean that churches will have to admit that their systems, their resources, their way of doing things are too often rigged to serve themselves and people like themselves. We will need to admit that this means others

have been left out, had their road into our churches made more difficult. We will have to realign our resources, invite diverse people into leadership, notice our neighbors, and be willing to worship in different ways if we want to reach new, diverse people for Jesus Christ and model to society an alternative to what we have now. Society needs to be shown this new model in order to see that racial reconciliation is possible.

No doubt your congregation has some extraordinary achievements worth celebrating to its credit. Are achievements in valuing diversity among them? When have you and your congregation felt heartbroken and frustrated about a lack of inclusion? When have you had difficult but important conversations about racial and ethnic diversity?

I have had two African American churches call me to their churches in my 34 years of serving in ministry. Both churches recognized their changing communities and wanted to invite their Latino neighbors to church. The first step was to invite a Latina woman into the pulpit and leadership of the church. The second step was a willingness to be educated in the culture of their neighbors and to withhold judgements. Little changes came first-baby steps if you will-but changes nevertheless.

What changes are you willing to make? Is the Spirit calling you to make changes in the increasingly diverse mosaic that is America?

*Christmas worship, held at the Adventist church, featured Mike Bannon, guitarist, Robert Ross, digital piano, and Pastor Alicia*

*The Reverend Alicia Riedy was born in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. She entered seminary in Monterrey, Mexico, in 1981 and was ordained elder in 1985. She served Mexican Methodist churches in Ensenada and Playas, Tijuana until becoming pastor with the United Methodist Church in Escondido, Calif., where she served a large English-speaking congregation and a Spanish language mission of 50 congregants. She is a member of the Association of Professional Chaplains, serving as a hospital and hospice chaplain in the State of Washington for several years. She served as minister of UCC of Sun City and UCC of Moreno Valley, Calif. before being ordained at the Congregational Church of Menifee in 2016, where she continues as senior minister. She currently serves with an ecumenical group – Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice – and has been trained to visit immigrant detainees.*

# A Quiet Day

## One Congregationalist's reflections on a silent day retreat

By Reverend Dan Vellinga

The day before the NACCC's 2017 Annual Meeting began, a group of us, maybe 20 or so, travelled by vans to the Lillian E. Smith Center, a site for education and an artist retreat, named in honor of the social justice activist and renowned author of the works *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream*. The center is located in the mountains of northeast Georgia about a half hour away from Piedmont College. We gathered for a silent retreat sponsored by the Congregational Society of Classical Retreat Guides – a day with no talking punctuated by three devotionals led by our retreat guide. Lunch was provided, and between the devotional gatherings retreat participants could individually participate in active learning centers scattered around the Center which appealed to a variety of learning styles, helping one to enter more fully into the theme of the day.

The Reverend Wendy Van Tassell, well known to people of the NACCC, led the retreat with the theme of "From, Within, Beyond: Wombs to Tombs," based on Psalm 139:5-6: "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon

me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me..." She challenged us very creatively to think of boundaries in as many, different ways as we could; natural boundaries, boundaries set by our parents that we may have resented back then but appreciate now, physical boundaries, spiritual and moral boundaries, societal boundaries, boundaries good and bad. She asked, "What about negative boundaries that serve as obstacles or obstructions?"

### Three Brief Thoughts About Three Profound Sessions

I cannot possibly review all that the day offered in the space provided by this magazine, so instead I'll share a brief thought from each session, then share a couple of experiences I had toward the end of the day. In Session 1, Wendy spoke of God-infused time and divine appointments, of "kairos" time as opposed to "chronos" (chronological) time. Those of us on the retreat had created a boundary on our time and lives in order to step away and even attend the retreat.

After some time for silent reflection we met for Session 2 -- Good boundaries are not always popular boundaries. In this session, Wendy asked us to consider the literal boundaries of ourselves, the space that we actually take by simply being in the room. She then moved to a discussion of the importance of boundaries with other people – boundaries sometimes crossed by people trying to meet their own needs in unhealthy and destructive ways.

Then there was Session 3 -- When crossing a boundary changes everything. Death, as well as birth, is a crossing of a boundary. Jesus crossed them in order to secure our covenant with God. He crossed other boundaries during the course of His ministry on Earth. \* For example, the dear woman in the Gospels who suffered for years with a hemorrhage before receiving healing is an example of Jesus crossing a boundary to touch her. (Luke 6:43-48) Wendy challenged us by asking what boundaries are we willing to cross in order to touch someone as servants of Jesus Christ?

### One Insight During the Silent Times that Really Made Me Think

While the insights of the three sessions gave me much fodder for thought, I spent most of the day simply being quiet. It takes a while, but I got comfortable just sitting and looking, sometimes praying, sometimes thinking, sometimes just looking and listening. I took a good hard look at the color of the leaves, and listened carefully for the birds, and heard the distant sound of traffic reminding

me that the busyness of life is never far away. I thought about things concerning myself, and about the Lord, that I had not pondered before. Most of the time I found myself with more questions than answers, but that is ok. The questions are equally valuable and capable of making a person grow emotionally and spiritually as the answers or insights into life or of Scripture. Perhaps the best progress of the day was all the time spent being quiet. Perhaps that is what prepared me for what followed.

### Meeting the Holy Spirit at the Foot of the Cross, and Making a Mess There

At the end of our day we gathered in a circle in the main cabin, the same place where we had met for earlier sessions. A cross formed from sticks in the yard lay on the floor in the center of our gathering space. Rev. Van Tassell gave each of us a votive candle. As we closed in prayer, everyone had a chance to light a candle and lift someone up in prayer. I thought of someone very special to me who had endured a very painful and difficult season and I heard, I thought, the voice of the Holy Spirit. Well, not exactly "heard," more like "felt." If one hears the voice of the Holy Spirit with one's own spirit, maybe that voice is felt more than heard. I'm not sure. I did become keenly aware that the Holy Spirit was present, and that the Spirit was incredibly aware of the suffering of my loved one. All of this left me with the feeling that God was paying attention to me, especially in that moment, as well as to my loved one, and that left me with the sensation that I was acutely aware of

both the healing Presence of God and of the pain my loved one had suffered. It was both joyous and sorrowful at the same time, and I was overwhelmed. I wept as I prayed.

After our time of prayer closed with a benediction, I tried to help clean up, but I was so flustered that I spilled the melted wax from the votive candles all over the floor and made a mess on the floor and, later, on a table. I tried to clean that up and made it worse. Obviously too clumsy at the moment to be much help, I left cleanup for others and shuffled over to the van to return to Piedmont College, feeling very aware and very alive. And this was before the annual meeting started.

### Conclusion

It's been a few months since our Annual Meeting in Georgia came to an end and I'm still having my quiet day. It's become part of my personal devotional time of study and prayer. The reflection questions prepared for the retreat were far too numerous to consider in one day, so I'm still going through them, and thinking about the thoughts and questions I remember of that day; and praying, and looking very carefully at the trees in my back yard and listening for the birds before I leave for the church. Next year I truly hope there is a quiet day retreat before the Annual Meeting begins in earnest in San Diego. I'm going to make every effort to be part of it, and I hope you will consider doing the same.

\*Here are some examples: Luke 2:7; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 6:6-11; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 14:1-6; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 13:10-17; Luke 5:43-48.

The Reverend Dan Vellinga is senior minister at First Congregational Church in Marshalltown, Iowa.



Rev. Vellinga lifts up a loved one in prayer at the Quiet Day.

# Kenya: *HOPE* for Abandoned Babies

by Larry F. Sommers

**T**hey threw the new baby into the river. The water carried him down to a weedy bank. Half in and half out of the water, he wailed all night and all the next day. But nobody heard him.

On the second night, an animal nibbled away the four fingers of his right hand, then lost interest. By the second day the baby's cries had ceased, and he scarcely moved. During the night his core body temperature dropped steeply.

On the third day a passer-by noticed the tiny brown form lying still on the bank, picked him up, and brought him—waterlogged yet dehydrated, nearly starved, and numb with cold—to the Nairobi police.

After hospital treatment, he was taken to a place where he might get help: Happy Life Children's Home, a ministry founded by the Revs. Peter and Faith Ndungu in the hectic, low-income neighborhood of Roysambu.

At Happy Life the boy received, for the first time in his short life, mothering care and a name of his own: Brice.

Happy Life Children's Home, a recommended international mission of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, is one of many private and religious organizations serving the children of Kenya and one of the few specializing in the rescue of abandoned babies. Most of these children have either been given up at the hospital by their parents or simply thrown away, as Brice was.

Today Brice is a thriving, engaging boy nearing the age of two. He has a healthy appetite and an interest in life, and is learning to walk and talk. The stumps of his lost fingers are healed over, and he still has his right thumb.

Not all of the 40 boys and 21 girls at Happy Life's Nairobi site arrived fresh from the maternity ward or the river. Little Margaret was given up by her mother only recently, at one year of age, due to a family breakup. A visiting work group from three U.S. Congregational churches met her in the Toddler Room, still in a haze of separation-induced depression after two weeks at Happy Life. Such children need

extra doses of maternal love—which is provided by a core group of experienced mothers Happy Life employs to supervise the infants 24 hours each day.

We learned that Happy Life is not an orphanage, but rather, a refuge for abandoned children. Its 43-member staff includes a nurse, Cynthia Kiamaitha, and a social worker, Jackie Okora. Each child's total well-being is closely watched by the whole staff, and referrals to medical or psychological specialists are frequent.

At three years of age, Gideon weighs only 5 kilograms (11 pounds). A premature baby weighing only 800 grams (1.7 pounds) at birth, he was given up by his mother as a child of incest. Throughout his life he has been subject to fevers, and he has a hole in his heart, a condition which is being monitored by medical specialists. Despite all this, Gideon is in good mental condition and is starting to thrive. A member of our group donated 4,000 Kenyan shillings—40 U.S. dollars—to buy him a special pair of shoes, which will help him learn to walk.

Happy Life strives to find adoptive parents for each child. The first children adopted, twin boys who had been discarded in a plastic bag at two days old, are now typical American 16-year-olds, living in Delaware. In recent years, however, most adoptions have been by Kenyan families. Happy Life keeps tabs on its adoptees, and most are doing very well.

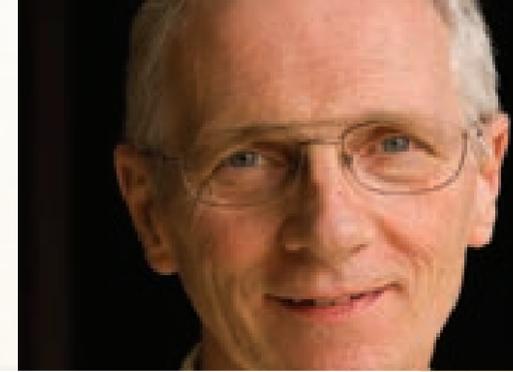
Because not every child will be adopted, Happy Life in 2010 started a remote campus, with its own school, at Juja Farm, community 18 miles from Nairobi. Now 61 children, ages 3 to 16, reside there. They live in dormitories where house mothers shepherd groups of 12 to 18 children in units that resemble a family home. Teachers at Happy Life's government-accredited school provide a high-quality education, instructing students in English, Swahili, and French.

Besides the 61 resident children who attend the school, another 82 day students come from the surrounding villages, for a total of 143.

At Juja Farm, Happy Life runs a commercial bakery that makes delicious bread. They also grow their own vegetables, raise chickens, and manufacture the children's school uniforms on several donated sewing machines. Moreover, the Happy Life compound is an oasis of greenery and flowers amid a large surrounding area of dry and desolate farmland. All this has been accomplished in only seven years since the Juja Farm campus was started.

The most recent flowering of Peter and Faith Ndungu's vision is a modern, five-story, 50-bed hospital being built in Nairobi, across a courtyard from the

LARRY F. SOMMERS is a member of Heritage Congregational Church, Madison, Wisconsin, and a friend of NACCC Missions. Since retiring as editor of *The Congregationalist*, he has devoted himself to writing prose fiction and is now working on a historical novel about Norwegian immigrants caught up in the turbulence of the U.S. Civil War.



The Rev. Peter Ndungu, upper left in blue shirt and tan vest, poses for a group shot with NACCC volunteers and local children at one of his churches in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Larry F. Sommers.

original children's home in Roysambu, Nairobi. Funds to build the hospital were donated by an American family in memory of their son Jesse Kay, who died at age 17 of leukemia. Construction is nearly complete; doctors and nurses are being recruited and equipment purchased toward a scheduled opening in November 2017.

It will, of course, serve the pediatric medicine needs of the children's home, saving thousands of dollars a year in medical fees now paid to outside institutions. But just as important, its care will be available at reasonable fees to residents of the surrounding neighborhood, which is now medically underserved.

Happy Life continues to grow out of the vision, dedication and love of Peter and Faith Ndungu. But sharing equally in the work are its staff, headed by capable administrator Sarah Kimani, who knows every detail of the Happy Life ministry; and by project manager Pastor Peter Njiiri, who always seems to be at the right place, at the right time, to coordinate logistics. And dozens, maybe hundreds, of local Kenyan volunteers

flock to the mission to feed, care for, and play with the children, loving "the least of these" in a tangible way.

Then there are the Americans. With the encouragement of Happy Life's U.S. Director, Rev. Jim Powell, and his wife, Sharon, and with periodic U.S. visits by Peter Ndungu, many American churches have become partners with Happy Life.

You can sponsor a child for \$30 per month or more. Or simply send a cash donation of any amount to NACCC with "Happy Life" in the subject line. (Every dollar given to a mission through the National Association goes to that mission, with no deduction for administration.) Or you can invite the Powells, or Peter Ndungu, to visit your church and tell the Happy Life story.

Find out more about Happy Life at [happylifechildrenshome.com](http://happylifechildrenshome.com). Or make personal contact with Jim and Sharon Powell in Delaware at 302-229-2098.

In doing so, you will be helping in God's work of taking very young, fragile lives from the point of imminent death to abundant Christian life, almost in the blink of an eye.

Just ask Gideon, or Margaret, or Brice.



The Rev. Peter Ndungu talks with children at one of his churches in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Larry F. Sommers.



Faith Ndungu explains the operations of Happy Life Children's Home to U.S. visitors in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by Larry F. Sommers.

# Gifts Not Found *Under the Christmas Tree*

By Ashley Cleere



Every December, after our bare tree is in place, my husband and I lug several large Rubbermaid bins of ornaments out of the guestroom closet. Some hold boxes of many sizes and colors, fit together like a clumsy Rubik's cube; others are laden with tissue paper and bubble wrap. Somewhere in the mix, a tattered, folded sheet of yellow-lined paper with writing in different colors of ink outline a physical description of almost every ornament, the year it was acquired, and usually an anecdote, for many of the treasures are handmade or depict a tradition, special occasion, or friendship.

As I peel away protective coverings, here are some of the riches that are revealed:

*A red sleigh, with my name and the year '1991' painted on it, was purchased by Nancy, my stepmom, at a Christmas fair.*

*As our extended family grew with marriages and births in the years following, Nancy returned to the fair and had sleighs made for each new relative.*

*A white wooden polar bear adorned by a shiny aluminum snowflake was given to me in 1992 by a friend with whom I am no longer in touch; yet, she greets me each Christmas with pleasant memories.*

*Two dainty porcelain pieces, a heart and an angel made by a popular Oregon artist, recall my interim ministry in that state.*

*One year, I made lace and string angels with a women's group and sent them to friends. Many people come to mind as I hang this angel on the tree.*

*A North Georgia sculptor of wind vanes created a copper Angel Gabriel for me because that iconic image tops the steeple of a church in my hometown in Massachusetts.*

These are just a few of the trinkets and tales that make decorating the tree a special occasion.

Each year, I tell myself I'll type the list and make a digital file for safekeeping. But truth be told, the written notes are almost superfluous. I've adorned the tree so many times, the

ornaments tell the stories without my looking up their history. As lovely as the decorations are, I cherish the memories and the wealth of relationships they portray more than the actual ornaments; they are Christmas gifts not found under the tree.

Once the tree is decorated, holiday nostalgia often carries me back to my eighth Christmas morning. As my sister, brother, and I were unwrapping the last presents, my mother became puzzled. She had selected similar sweaters and other matching items for my sister and me, but in a few instances, it appeared that only one of us had opened something that each of us should have received. Too, she remembered buying more Legos for my brother than she saw in his stack of gifts. Discreetly, that afternoon, my parents combed the shed, and contacted local police. Together, they concluded that a few boxes had been stolen while our family was attending Christmas Eve services. Months later, my parents disclosed what had happened with this explanation: The gifts that were not under our tree found their way to children who might have been without Christmas presents. Our family unwittingly had engaged in an act of generosity. I cannot recall any of the specific toys or clothes I unwrapped that year, but I remember with clarity that tender moment of childhood awakening.

Churches and other organizations have developed varied opportunities for people to provide gifts and other forms of support for families they do not know - intentionally - not only at Christmas, but throughout the year. The Mission and Outreach Ministry Council and NACCC staff expend ample effort in this regard, connecting individuals and congregations to ministries around the country and the world, delivering up-to-date information about programs, and forwarding financial contributions, thereby facilitating informed, responsible giving.

The generation known as Millennials, born between 1980 and 1996, comprise the largest segment of the U.S. population, exceeding 75 million in number. They form the age group that encompassed my parents the year of the unexpectedly benevolent Christmas. Preferences have changed over the last forty-plus years. Today, adults between the ages of 20 and 36 value experiences over objects. Data show that 78% of Millennials would choose to spend money on an event that creates a memory rather than on a desirable possession. The Millennials' passion for live experiences has caught on.

Consumer trends since 1987 reflect a significant increase in spending on activities and events across all generations. Instead of buying sweaters and Legos for their children for Christmas, parents may opt for a family vacation, tickets to a concert, or ballet lessons: gifts that are hard to wrap and put under the tree, but that leave a lasting impression.

Another gem in our collection of Christmas ornaments is a small, iridescent globe adorned with a sketch of the First Congregational Church of Etna, the first church I served, that ordained me to Christian ministry. On the back of the ornament the words to "Silent Night" in German are imprinted. In the 1990s, the congregation still sang "Stille Nacht" on Christmas Eve to honor their heritage, having been founded by people of German and Swiss descent. The church leaders who designed the ornament included the "Stille Nacht" verse to preserve a Christmas Eve tradition they were not sure would endure. By selling the ornaments to raise money for the Sunday School, the legacy of the past offered an opportunity to fund the future. Voices raised in song and a fragile bulb recall the hearty vision of nineteenth century settlers -- the church, their gift to eternity.

Like cartoons of Christmas ornaments, the National Association is dense with well-protected treasures. In the local church, precious traditions may take the form of vibrant events, such as a holiday fair or rummage sale. Objects convey meaning that transcends their material value as deacons prepare a table for communion or place water in a baptismal font. Religious education may have visible components, but the faith that is nurtured eclipses artwork or a workbook. Whether it be a new furnace, assistance with a pastoral search process, education for clergy and laity, or another laudable goal, the NACCC helps local churches access tangible resources to accomplish myriad intangible outcomes. Following the example set by Millennials, gifts made to the NACCC are investments in live experiences, gifts not found under the Christmas tree that abide indefinitely. In keeping with symbolism expressed through a verse of Stille Nacht on a twenty-five-year-old ornament, such contributions honor the legacy of spiritual ancestors, while forging new memories and building a future.



*The Rev. Dr. Ashley Cook Cleere is a 1991 CFTS graduate who serves as Vice President of the Board of Governors of the Congregational Foundation and is liaison to the Board of Directors.*

# Meeting JESUS CHRIST

By Peter Grove Armstrong

If the opportunity for an unhurried private audience with Jesus Christ were offered you, would you take it? Most of us, probably would.

The astounding truth is, we can have an audience with Jesus whenever we want or need to. Tragically that reality has been obscured, perhaps even replaced by the rituals, rites, disciplines and practices associated with a Christian way of life.

As a youth, I was urged to have devotions daily. All through seminary and my years of pastoral ministry, I began each day dutifully having "my devotions." But, it didn't occur to me that Jesus through his Holy Spirit was there with me in my study and I could actually have been conversing with him. I don't know if he felt ignored, but I do know I wasn't building a warm relationship with him. My devotional time was a ritual, a duty to be performed, an item to be checked off my schedule—a routine that substituted for a relationship.

Nevertheless, as I read the Scriptures regularly, the Lord Jesus graciously gradually made me realize that he was right there with me, giving me his full attention. More and more he showed me how his Word applied to my situation each day. We became friends. That friendship, buttressed by his presence and truth, inspired me, prepared me for, and sustained me during the almost overwhelming storms that were to come.

He did this two ways. First, he made me realize that "having devotions" is not a duty I must perform, and be condemned and punished if I neglected them. Rather, my devotion times are gracious opportunities to sit down with himself for as long as I need to. He led

me out of unbiblical legalism and its ever present guilt, into a daily enjoyment of his grace, presence and counsel.

Second, he taught me how to make room for him in my Bible reading. He taught me to read the Bible by the clock, not by the chapter or verses. He taught me to decide how many minutes I was going to spend in the Word of God rather than how many chapters I would read. This simple idea has had amazing results. It literally opened my life to Jesus' involvement. Now, when Jesus calls attention to something in the first, second or fifteenth verse, I can stop and spend as much time as I want talking with him about it. No hurry. Just delightful conversation with my Savior and friend. How wonderful!!

If, on the other hand, I focus on reading a certain number of chapters, anything Jesus brings to my attention will probably be ignored—because I have to finish the chapter(s). In that case, I've done my duty; read my Bible, had "my devotions," and satisfied my conscience. But I've had no fellowship with Jesus.

How tragic!! There is one advantage to this approach, however. It never asks me to move out of my comfort zone or to correct my negative attitudes or to forgive those who have offended me. But, Jesus often does. When we meet with him, he sometimes gets really personal. Just reading a few chapters each day is easier than developing and sustaining a relationship with Jesus, but much less rewarding.

May I encourage you to focus on meeting personally with Jesus in his Word. It is one of the greatest privileges he offers you. Come into his presence

with singing. Give him time. Listen to what he says as you read. Talk with him about it. Wherever you are reading, in dusty Deuteronomy or elegant Ephesians, Jesus will speak directly to you about a concern on your mind at that very moment, give you direction, peace, a blessing or all of the above and more.

He says to us as he did to those who came to him, burdened with legalistic obligations and guilt,

*"Come to me, ...  
and I will  
give you rest"*

*(Matthew 11:28)*



*Grove Armstrong is Pastor Emeritus of the Central Congregational Church, Derry, New Hampshire, from which he retired in 1996 after a 16-year ministry. He and his wife, Charity, have eight children, twenty-nine grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. They live in Bear, Delaware, and worship at the Bible Fellowship Church of Newark. A 1953 graduate of Roberts Wesleyan College and Asbury Theological Seminary in 1956, he served as a Free Methodist minister for 17 years. After being called to the Central Congregational church in 1980, he served several years as secretary of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies. In 1992 the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches awarded him the Harry R. Butman Award for his work in writing the Lay Minister's Training Course. An approved Seminar Instructor with Prison Fellowship International, he has conducted seminars in prisons in Arizona and New Hampshire for the last twenty years.*



## Necrology 2017



Reverend Dr. Gary W. Smothers (1935-2016)

The Reverend Dr. Gary W. Smothers, of Holbrook, Mass., passed away after a brief period of failing health, April 1, 2016, at the age of 81. Gary was born in Iowa and raised in the small town of McGregor. He graduated from the University of Dubuque, Iowa, where he met and married his wife, Delores (Dee) Kubatzke. Rev. Smothers earned his masters and doctoral degrees from Andover Newton Theological School. After serving at churches in Marshalltown, Iowa; Neosho, Missouri, and Galesburg, Illinois, Gary was called to Winthrop Congregational Church in Holbrook. He was pastor there for 30 years. After retiring from Winthrop and full-time work, Gary went on to serve as associate minister at Bethany Congregational Church for 10 years. Gary was very active with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, serving on the Division for Ministry, Executive Committee, Program Committee, and Youth Ministry. He was preceded in death by his wife, Delores. He is survived by his daughter, Jeanne Parker, and his son, Jay R. Smothers. Memorial contributions may be made in his name to either the Winthrop Congregational Church, 16 N. Franklin St., Holbrook, MA 02343, or Bethany Congregational Church, 18 Spear St., Quincy, MA 02169.



Reverend Thomas 'Tom' Thorne (1943-2017)

The Reverend Thomas "Tom" Thorne, 74, Neosho, Mo., passed away on Sept. 9, 2017, following a brief illness. Tom served others through his work with the church, public education, sports, and community service, and was awarded the Neosho Exchange Club Golden Deeds Award. He taught in Chanute, Lawrence, and Eureka, Kansas, before returning to Neosho in 1981. He then taught in the East Newton School system, owned and operated a sporting goods store; worked for the Newton County Juvenile Department and coached in area schools. Tom was a Master Decathlete. The Reverend Michael Chittum recalled Tom as "one who cared for all people but, especially, cared for the people in the church he served, the First Congregational Church of Neosho, Missouri." He added that "Tom was committed to helping young people and was able to serve as both a motivator for them and an example to them due to his life and his skills." Tom is survived by his wife, Patricia; three children, Timothy Thorne, Kerri Bowser, and Jason Thorne; 10 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Contributions in memory of Tom may be made to the Tom Thorne Memorial Fund, c/o Clark Funeral Home, PO Box 66, Neosho, MO 64850.

# REFLECTION:

*“To whom much is given much is to be expected”*

*By Reverend Dr. Martin W. Hall and Norm Christensen*

*To follow is an article, written by Norm Christensen, which appeared in our August newsletter. Our church has been a member of the NACCC for many years, and I believe it is important that our leadership be involved and engaged in the work of the Association that we are affiliated with. As church Moderator, and first-time attendee of NACCC Annual Meeting and Conference, Norm believed it was his responsibility to attend the meeting and learn more about the Association. Thank you, Norm, for attending the meeting and sharing your thoughts with the congregation. Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall, Senior Minister, North Shore Congregational Church, Fox Point, Wis.*

The 63rd Annual Meeting and Conference of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) was hosted by the local Methodist Congregational Federated Church and Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia from June 24 to 27, 2017. As Moderator, the North Shore Congregational Church Council elected me to attend as voting delegate, with Marty, Marcia, and Rick Bauzenberger attending as your alternates. North Shore members Dottie Schimpf, Barb Bauzenberger and Debby Fulton (the NACCC Director of Development and Communications) were also with us. The theme of this meeting was, “Dreaming, Talking, and Acting,” and we experienced all of it.

This was a first-time experience for me, and I will attempt to share in this report to you highlights of this meeting. But first, I have a confession to make. Prior to this meeting, the NACCC was for me an organization that had a headquarters building in Oak Creek, Wisconsin with additional staff presence at Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan.

From their occasional visits to our church, I knew some of the previous Executive Directors, like Mike Robertson, John Carson, Tom Richard and currently Rev. Dr. Michael Chittum. Our North Shore Church was an important member of this voluntary association to which I most often was reminded we needed to send more money to qualify as a fair share contributor. Our church is a very important member, and the NACCC is more important to us and the “Congregational Way” than I ever realized prior to this experience! We do need to do more and we will.

Following orientation as a first-time attendee on Saturday morning, I was now prepared to participate. The business meetings and their agenda on Saturday, Monday and Tuesday were what you would have expected of any organization. They passed a balanced budget following a well-documented Treasurer’s report. However, what also soon became apparent is how much recent effort has been expended to reorganize the NACCC into what can and, I think, will become a much more effective instrument in

*Norm Christensen  
Currently serving as Moderator of North Shore Congregational Church in Fox Point, Wisconsin, Norm recalls being raised in the Sunday Schools and Pilgrim Fellowship activities of two of the historic Congregational Churches of our New England heritage. Over 40 year ago Norm and his wife Marcia moved to Wisconsin, and later joined North Shore Congregational Church. While a member of the church, Norm served as a member and Chair of the Stewardship and Diaconate Boards, while Marcia served on the BCE and Benevolence Boards.*



fulfilling their mission of “Bringing together Congregational Christian Churches for mutual care and outreach to our world in the name of Jesus Christ!” As an example, the Executive Director will now move from Olivet to Oak Creek, and plans will be made to improve and maintain the headquarters building, which is ten minutes from a major airport. I am certain that we will be hearing more good news as our own Rev. Dr. “Marty” Hall was elected to serve a four-year term on the NACCC Board of Directors. Congratulations Marty!

There were 15 workshops held over the four days of the meeting. Each topic was well considered and effectively presented, from all reports. It was not possible to attend all of them, but each dealt with a topic important to the operation of every church regardless of size or financial strength. Incidentally, there were 340 churches, with 4 new member churches joining the NACCC at this meeting. Of these, 107 were in attendance, and I was surprised to learn that over half contain a membership of less than 50 members. We at North Shore have much for which to be grateful and thankful. Also, to whom much is given much is to be expected.

One of the highlights for me was the Congregational Lecture Unlike previous years when the lecture was given by an individual, this year a five-member panel shared what it means to own the covenant and share in the history, freedom, and responsibility of the Congregational Way. Marty was one of the five, and I could not have been more proud to see him and hear his words as our senior pastor.

Sunday was for worship, the first



*The 18-ton organ located at the Piedmont College Chapel.*

of three bible lectures by the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, and workshops. The worship and communion service with all in attendance was just something that you had to experience. Dottie Schimpf also added her voice to the choir. I have a picture of the 18-ton (that’s right 18 ton) organ, as the centerpiece of the chancel, which was magnificent to see and hear, as was the message given by a recent CFTS graduate.

In preparing this report to you, I have saved the best for last and that is the three Bible lectures given on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday by Barbara Brown Taylor. She recently retired as a professor at Piedmont College, is an ordained minister in the Episcopal Church, and New York Times best-selling author. Her insight and sharing on the personality

and faith of Peter, with an amazing delivery ability, was a lasting memory for me. Each of her lectures -- “act first think later,” “dreaming outside of the box,” and “talking your way to the truth” -- gave me a new understanding of Peter and why Jesus could say that he was the “Rock” on which the church would be built. I could see many of the same personality faults of Peter in me and many others, but I can also see why Jesus chooses him and all of us to build His church!

Thanks again for giving me this meaningful experience. Let’s talk further about our role, responsibility and benefits gained by our participation in the NACCC.

LET'S  
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**&**  
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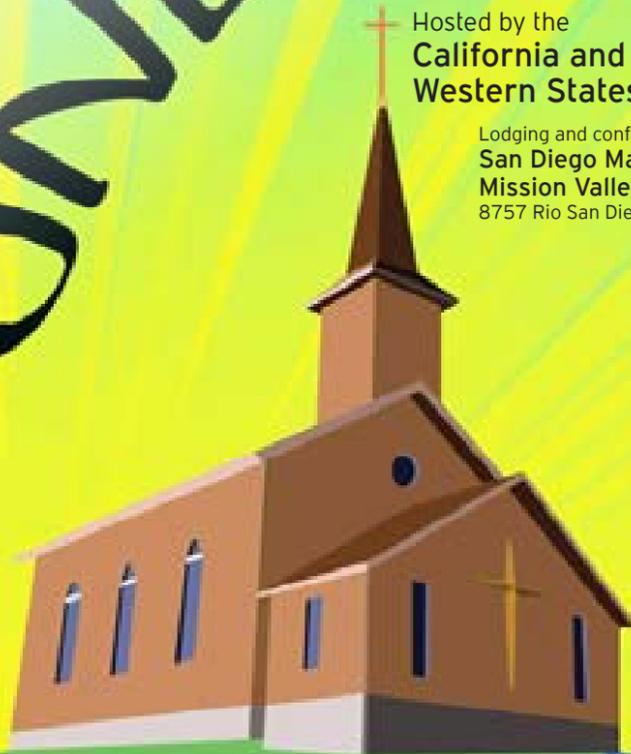


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**UNLEASHED!**

...and you  
 shall be My  
 witnesses  
 Acts 1:8



**Heavenly  
 Seat**

Take a seat  
 Sit for a while  
 You've been walking for  
 too long  
 Find rest on us...  
 We will hold you up  
 For we are Strong  
 A ring of Three  
 Not easily broken...  
 Keeping you safe  
 From all harm  
 Come and sit  
 With us  
 And find rest...

*The picture is a chair that I saw at the Kenduskeag  
 Union Church in Maine at the Spring meeting earlier  
 in the year. I was drawn by the seat.*

*The Rev. Michael Glidden, D.Min has been the senior pastor  
 of the Sebago Lake Congregational Church in Standish, Maine  
 since 2012. He has been pastoring since 1993. Rev. Glidden  
 earned his Master of Divinity Degree  
 in 1995 from Bangor Theological  
 Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry  
 Degree from Gordon-Conwell  
 Theological Seminary in 2002. He  
 was ordained in 2000. Mike lives in  
 Saco, Maine, with his wife Rhonda.*



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## Recent Calls

*Windsor Congregational Church, Windsor, Mass.* has called the Rev. Heather Jubly as Pastor.

*Mayflower Congregational Church, Lansing, Mich.* has called the Rev. Mark McCormack as Pastor.

*Orthodox Congregational Church, Petersham, Mass.* has called the Rev. David Purdy as Pastor.

*Sturges Memorial Congregational Church, Port Huron, Mich.* has called the Rev. Dr. G. Patrick Thompson as Pastor.

*First Congregational Church, Laingsburg, Mich.* has called the Rev. Scott Statson as Pastor.

## In Search Senior Minister

Duluth Congregational Church, Duluth, Minn.  
El Dorado Community Church, Eldorado, Calif.  
First Congregational Church, Ashland, Neb.  
First Congregational Church, Emporia, Kan.

First Congregational Church, Fall River, Mass.  
First Congregational Church, Interlachen, Fla.  
First congregational Church, Marshfield, Mass.  
First Congregational Church, Portland, Mich.  
First Congregational Church, Saugerties, N.Y.  
First Congregational Church, Terre Haute, Ind.  
First Congregational (Road) Church, Stonington, Conn.  
Flatbush-Tompkins Congregational Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.  
Founders Congregational Church, Harwinton, Conn.  
Mayflower Congregational Church, Mansfield, Ohio  
Mohegan Congregational Church, Uncasville, Conn.  
Mount Hope Congregational Church, Livonia, Mich.  
Olivet Congregational Church, Olivet, Mich.  
Ozaukee Congregational Church, Grafton, Wis.  
Plymouth Congregational Church, Kenosha, Wis.  
Second Congregational Church, Jewett City, Conn.  
St. Johns Church, Idalia, Colo.

## Associate/Assistant Minister

United Church of Marco Island, Marco Island, Fla.

## Non-NACCC Church

First Community Church of Christ, Joplin, MO

# SLEEPING, DREAMING, AND AWAKENING:

## Biblical and Spiritual Reflections on a Human Process

Rev. Dr. Charles Packer, Chaplain-Director of the Congregational Retreat Society and Dean of the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies, will lead three sessions during the Quiet Day Retreat held on Friday, June 22, 2018, from 8:00 am-3:30 pm, as we consider how science, scripture, and Christian tradition encourage us to examine and understand

better our physical and spiritual sleep, dreams, and awakenings. There will be long blocks of silence to read, meditate, journal, and delve deep.

Venue and cost will be determined soon, but please contact Charles Packer at [drcapacker@gmail.com](mailto:drcapacker@gmail.com) if you would like more information or have questions.

## JANUARY 8, 2018

General copy deadline for The Congregationalist March 2018 issue. Contact Marianne King, editor, [Marianne.kingwi@gmail.com](mailto:Marianne.kingwi@gmail.com) or 800-262-1620, ext. 1624

## SAVE THE DATE: APRIL 9-12, 2018

### 49th Annual Minister's Convocation Mid-West

The Weber Center, 1257 East Siena Heights Drive, Adrian, MI

## SAVE THE DATE: June 23 – 26, 2018

### 64th Annual Meeting & Conference of the National Association of Congregational Churches

San Diego Marriott Mission Valley, 8757 Rio San Diego Drive, San Diego, CA

## July 29 - August 3, 2018

Boston Seminar in Congregational History and Polity  
Mariner's House, 11 North Square, and Congregational Library,  
14 Beacon Street, Boston, MA

## October 11 – October 13, 2018

Awakenings Symposium  
First Congregational Church, 312 West Main Street,  
Marshalltown, IA

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Copy deadline for each issue is noted in the previous issue's "Calendar" section.

Letters to the Editor are welcome. All letters may be edited for clarity and length. We regret we cannot publish or respond to all letters

The NACCC reserves the right to refuse any advertisement.

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