

# THE VISITOR

Midsummer 2025

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

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Ginny Brown Daniel, Interim Pastor**

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I'm deeply grateful to the Congregational Church of Austin for the opportunity to use my continuing education time to attend a women's leadership expedition in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. Surrounded by rugged beauty, I began each day with yoga, rode horseback through breathtaking trails, swam in a glacial lake, and built meaningful connections with a circle of eight fellow strong and wise women. This time of renewal and learning has re-energized my spirit and leadership as we continue our ministry together. Thank you for supporting this vital rhythm of rest, reflection, and growth.



## September Visitor Deadline Aug 25, 2025

### Church Leadership

Trustee's Chair	Bill Campbell
Deacon's Chair	Roberto H. & Sarah D.
Moderator	Liz Nash
Treasurer	Pam Tucker
Financial Secretary	Jaime Hadley
Children's Sunday School	Kay Pruett
Youth Sunday School	Open
Clerk	Reuel Nash
Historians	Pat & Mel Oakes
Newsletter Personals Editor	Pat Oakes
Member-at-Large	Bill Beardall
Pastor	Ginny Brown Daniel
Dir. of Online Ministries	Serge Martinez
Director of Music	Open

## Personals by Pat Oakes

**Roberto Hernandez** reports on the **Hernandez-Geer** family. "We are settled in Apodaca, located in the state of Nuevo Leon (a Monterrey suburb) less than 10 minutes away from my parents' home. I and the kiddos pop-in every weekday to say "hi" to abuelos after school, and are getting VERY busy, between, school, swimming classes, some other activities and family reunions. Missing my church family of course. You all are a big part of our lives that we left in Austin. I'm sharing some pictures with you for the church news." **Xitlali** and **Sebastian** certainly are growing!!



7/25 Sebastian bringing flowers to his abuela



7/25 Sebastian Hernandez-Geer



7/25 Xitlali Hernandez-Geer



7/25 Xitlali and Sebastian Hernandez-Geer at home in Apodaca, Mexico

**Jaime Hadley** attended his annual American Iris Society National Convention in early June. The convention was hosted by the Big Sky Iris club in Billings, MT, and the event included visits to seven different Iris Gardens and thousands of varieties of Iris, mostly Tall Bearded. He and his Iris friends from Austin went a few days early and stayed a day or two late and were able to take in the sights at Yellowstone National Park as well as Little Big Horn, Livingston and Bozeman. The travelers spotted native Iris growing wild in Yellowstone, in addition to bison, grizzly, pronghorn, and elk.

**Gail Christeson** and **John Goff** 's identical triplet grandsons **Lelan**, **Bennett**, and **William** celebrated their first birthday in mid-July! They were born early at 27 weeks, but everyone is doing well, and the developmental pediatricians are happy with their progress.

## Personals (cont.) by Pat Oakes



John and Gail's identical triplet grandsons Lelan, Bennett, and William celebrated their first birthday in July!!

**René Slataper** shares. "I am loving being in the Berkshires and spending time on the mountain. This has been a wonderful adventure (serving as the summer pastor at Mount Washington Church of Christ in Massachusetts) and I'm hoping to find out the location of my next adventure very soon. I hope everyone is having a great and safe summer. Missing you all so much!" **Liz Nash** shares more info about that church there. "Despite the Church of Christ name, it's a UCC church. This isn't Church of Christ country but it's very much Congregational Church country. We meet for 10 weeks in the summer, and the year-round folks get together at Thanksgiving and Christmas, although getting the building warm enough for those cold weather services is currently a challenge, as the wood stove and chimney need work to be safe. The church building is small - we are only supposed to have 49 people inside per the fire code, and usually that's not an issue. The building has no water or bathroom (used to have an outhouse, which I definitely remember) but the town hall across the small unpaved parking lot has one if someone has the key. The sanctuary is quite plain with large windows - very classically Congregational with wonderful old window glass panes. "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills" has been painted in a lovely stencil behind the pulpit for much longer than I have been alive, I think. The church and the town hall are the center of the town - not even a post office here. **René**, as the summer minister, is really a central person for this time in Mt. Washington. The Deacons, like others in recent years, worked hard to rent a house for him to be here in the community (not easy to find but even

those who don't come to church know that's important, which helps). He is leading vibrant and excellent worship. The church puts on two of the major town activities here and the minister is part of these: the Mt Washington Church Fair the first Saturday in August - the big center of the summer here - and the softball games on Sunday afternoon, which are less frequent this year because the people here on the mountain who were the big players are much older now so we are just scheduling them on the high attendance weekends. In the church there are two rows on one side that people aren't using much right now. I think that's because one branch of my **Garrett** family here used them for so long, and for various reasons, the elders are not up there anymore. My roots are very deep here. I am so happy that **René** is our pastor this year." **Reuel** chimes in at this point to say, "I have to add that this church is the reason we started going to a UCC church in Fremont, California. **Liz** and I played tennis in Niles one day, and she noticed the Niles Congregational Church across the street from the tennis courts and said it was the same denomination as the church she knew in Mt. Washington, MA. We had been looking for a church, so we went the next day and enjoyed it. Husband and wife ministers were **Walter** and **Sally Smith**, and friendly people who introduced us as visitors as if we were their friends, etc. A truly life-changing experience, as **Liz** eventually decided to pursue becoming an ordained minister herself, with Rev. **Sally Smith** being her mentor."

**Rambie Briggs** lives overlooking Lake Travis. He saw the lake rise from 637 feet to 677 feet from the 4th of July to the 21st—up 40 feet. The lake is considered full when it reaches 681 feet. It is now the fullest it has been in years and years.

**Kevin Dietz** and his family had unexpected water in their home from a storm on May 28th which brought high water to Shoal Creek which then flowed into their nearby home. **Kevin** says, "We moved back into our home on the 14th of July and **Rachel** and the kids (mostly **Rachel**) have been reorganizing ever since. The whole family spent the week of July 4th in Santa Fe. Great weather and some fun hikes. Looking forward to being back at church on August 9th."

Photos cont. on the next page

Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes



New 6/2025 New flooring at the Dietzes' home after bad flooding on Shoal Creek on May 28<sup>th</sup>



6/15/25 Andy Dierksen and Sara Ross at church

**Pam Tucker** was delighted to attend her daughter **Savanna's** graduation from the University of Washington on June 14. **Savanna** graduated this year, magna cum laude, with a minor in nutrition from the department of Law, Society, and Justice at the University of Washington. She will be attending UW law school in the fall



July 4th, 2025 Santa Fe with Jon, Isabella and Francesca Dietz

It was a joy to see **Andy Dierksen** at church four Sundays in a row — visiting here in Austin from upstate New York while doing construction and remodeling on the NE Austin house of former church cellist, **Tony Rogers**. **Andy** was looking forward to going home to Arkansas and enjoying a several week visit with son **Deek**, five, and daughter **Astrid**, three.



6/14/25 Graduate Savanna Tucker, magna cum laude from the University of Washington

Photos cont. on the next page

**Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes**



6/14/25 Savanna Tucker's graduation from the University of Washington -- Pam Tucker, Savanna's serious boyfriend Xavier Fuzat, Savanna, Savanna's best friend since they were 13 Daryl Hale, and Harrison

internship at Apple on the 16th. In the fall he will be back at Stanford and will earn his Master's next May. Daughters **Sarah** and **Mardie** did a great job shuttling **Pat** and **Mel** from one activity to the next — or back to the hotel for naps! The second adventure was on July 16th while daughter **Sarah** was in Austin visiting for six days. She drove them to San Antonio where they had a long - awaited lunch visit with **Nodie Murphy** and her daughter **Sarah Sennour**. The absolute icing on the cake was having **Garry and Judy Cole** (who now live in San Antonio) —long-time members of the church in Austin, join them for the visit. They had not all been together in person for many years. It was a wonderful time traveling down memory lane!



6/15/25 I-r Aaron Kramer (Mardie's new love), Mel and Pat Oakes, grandson Durham Deifell (holding on to his grandmother to keep her from wobbling), Mardie Oakes, Beth Oakes, Ethan Buck, Eugene Buck, Emily, Buck, Sarah Oakes and Joe Pierce

There might be a few of you who remember **Dennis Schneider** and his wife **Kazuko** who were part of the church family between 1972 and 1975 while he worked on his Ph.D. at UT. They also had their daughter **Takako** while they were here — and then moved to Tokyo where **Dennis** taught at Tokyo Women's Christian University. Sadly, **Kazuko** died a number of years ago from early onset Alzheimer's. **Dennis** stayed in Tokyo and was a staunch member of the Tokyo Union Church where he was very active in the choir and music of the church and also served on a number of committees. **Takako** now lives in Eugene, OR, with her son **Kade** (14). **Takako** and her ex-husband both live in Eugene and remain close friends and co-parents — **Takako**, **Kade**, and **Rob** were all at the service in Tokyo. The funeral service was on July 19, 2025. The staff at the church very kindly filmed the beautiful service. It was so meaningful to be able to share in this experience. Here is the link if you are interested <https://youtu.be/0eTCqeVET0Q>

**Mel and Pat Oakes** have had two adventures this summer. The first was over a long Father's Day weekend, a five-day visit to Palo Alto, CA, for the graduation of their grandson **Ethan Buck** (parents are **Beth Oakes** and **Eugene Buck**) from Stanford University. The whole immediate family (11) was there plus many family members from **Eugene's** side of the family. **Ethan's** degree is in computer science — he graduated on Sunday, the 15th of June, and immediately went to work for his summer



7/16/25 Visit with Nodie and Garry and Judy Cole in San Antonio — Mel, Pat, Sarah, Nodie, Judy, and Garry

Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes

**Lucy Erda** had marvelous experience with the Tapestry Singers in June. There were about 30 singers and some of their family members in the group. She says, "I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit Munich, Germany, Salzburg and Vienna in Austria, and Prague in the Czech Republic. While there, we had the opportunity to sing in some of the old Roman Catholic Cathedrals. If you ever have a chance to sing in one of these grand marble halls, go for it! The acoustics are so sensitive, even a whisper becomes incredibly amplified. Our first concert was on June 13th at the Salzburg Cathedral. Choir Director **Jenn Goodner** later said that at the start of the concert, we all had our usual "Happy Singer Faces" on but when the cathedral began to resonate with the sound, our faces changed to amazement. I had a peak moment when I took an outdoor walk around the cathedral and saw a wonderful Pieta - I recognized it from an art history class way back in art school. It was a joy to see art history in person. On June 14th, we did the "Sound of Music" tour. Few people know that the scenes in the movie are, in fact, a tapestry of various historic places in the area. Of course, we had to sing "Doe A Deer" when we got to the stairs where the song was sung for the movie. It was amazing. **Jenn** assembled the choir, designating which stairs were Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do - the minute she raised her hands to direct, everyone around us stopped as if they knew we were going to sing. Cameras came out - the song was sung. It was fun! Their tour guide shared many stories, one was the fact that the von Trapp family escaped by train, not on foot. That was a good thing because hiking up the mountain from their home would have led them directly to Kehlsteinhaus, (Eagle's Nest), one of many Nazi headquarters...



Summer 2025

**Kay Pruett** spent many miles and two months traveling in her Prius this summer. Making a point to visit national parks and monuments and other nature areas, she was nurtured by a wide variety of nature creating an abundance of awe and joy. One of the most impressive of these places were the three days she spent in Moab, UT, visiting Arches National Park. **Kay's** longest stop was Bellingham, WA, where she spent three weeks house-sitting while her sister **Charlene** and husband **Doug** travelled around Italy. Upon their return, her sister **Linda** and husband **Mark** from Arkansas surprised everyone by visiting for a few days. They were able to convene a short gathering all together with their mother **Wynona**. **Kay** also visited several friends, including a week living within and caring for (and eating from) a yard-sized food garden in Olympia, Washington. She encountered a plethora of beautiful roses at the international rose test garden in Portland, Oregon. Finally, she renewed her longest sustained friendship in the new home of her dear friend **Barbara** in Fremont, CA, before turning on audiobooks and traveling, as quickly as reasonably possible, to return to friends and "family" at home in Austin.



Summer 2025 The Pieta that Lucy saw in Salzburg

Photos cont. on next page

Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes



Summer 2025 Kay Pruett at Olympic National Park  
in Washington state



Summer 2025 Kay Pruett took this picture from her campground  
near Moab, UT



2025 Arches National Park

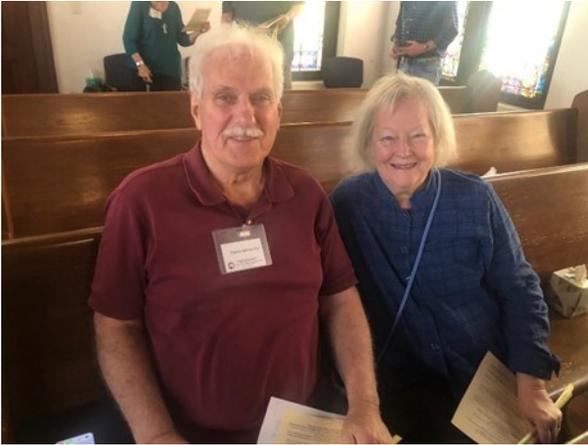


Summer 2025 Pride Parade in Olympia, Washington

Our visitors for the last academic year, **Charlie Bernacchio** and **Catherine Hannon**, send us greetings from Maine after taking care of their elementary school age grandson here in Austin. "Please share our love and prayers to those families affected by the tragic flooding. We were kept informed about some children who attended the Regents school along w/ our grandson. Fortunately, these children were rescued successfully. I hope the surrounding faith communities can bring healing to those parts of Texas most affected. **Catherine** and I have been enjoying summer in Maine visiting coastal towns around Camden-Rockport and this week in Southwest Harbor. We plan to visit **Liz** and **Reuel** later in August at their home in the Berkshires."

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## Personals (cont.) by Pat Oakes



Charlie Bernacchio and Catherine Hannon

**Pam Tucker** shares her adventure in Nepal. “When I was in college, I read every book I could find on summiting the mountains of the Himalayan range. I wanted to do it. I was becoming a pretty good rock climber (this was BEFORE climbing walls). No expedition would consider someone without experience over 20,000 feet, so I put down a deposit for a Denali summit expedition in Alaska, and I was excited. I was playing club and intermural sports too, and I had a very bad knee injury—anterior cruciate ligament torn, medial collateral ligament torn, medial meniscus shredded. After surgery, I realized I would never be able to summit anything that required technical climbing (ropes, harness, crampons, ice ax...), so I canceled my trip to Alaska.

About a year ago, maybe because I was approaching age 65, I started thinking about trekking in Nepal, which does not require technical climbing but would be more challenging due to the altitude than the non-technical hikes in Colorado, so I decided to do an Everest Base Camp Trek. For the past year, before making any trekking reservations, I have been training for a trek in Nepal. There were lots of days at the gym, hard rides on the bike almost daily, and even training with an oxygen limiting mask to prepare for the high altitude.

I landed in Kathmandu, Nepal (elevation 4600 feet) on April 13<sup>th</sup>, and as the plane taxied and I looked out the window at the incredible scenery and mountains, I unexpectedly teared up. I was choked up just to be there. It was like finally coming to the place I had wanted to go so long ago. I didn’t know that those old emotions were still there. It was a great feeling to be there, like coming full circle.

The trek started with a helicopter ride from Kathmandu to Lukla (elevation 9400 feet), the most dangerous airport in the world. It was the first time I

had flown in a helicopter, and it was incredible. The weather was not great, but that made it more interesting. That runway is in the mountains with a 12° incline, and it is too short for most two or four passenger planes to land. The planes that do land there have two pilots and 14 - 20 passengers. These planes are designed for short takeoff and landings. It is amazing and frightening to watch the planes land and take off. One thing to note that from Lukla is that there are no roads and no vehicular travel—not even a bicycle. The trails are too rough. There are lots of villages with houses, tea houses, monasteries, temples, and other structures above Lukla, which are at higher elevations, so how do they get the construction materials to these other places with no vehicles? EVERYTHING is carried by porters or pack animals (yak, mules, horses, chauri gai (yak-cow breed)). The pack animals are limited to 60 kg weight and the human porters have a higher limit of 80 kg (176 lbs)! I chose a less traveled route to Everest Base Camp which was a loop rather than out and back. Most trekkers choose the out and back trail to Everest Base Camp.

Right after getting my stuff from the helicopter, I met my guide, **Lahkpa**. It means Wednesday. I met two Mingma’s, which means Tuesday. Sherpas often are named for the day of the week. You can see how that might cause problems! We started hiking right away, straight up about 500 steps. Whoa, that was a shock to the lungs and heart. I only had to carry about 15 pounds of things I might need for the day (water, warmer jacket, rain jacket, rain pants, sunscreen...), but it felt heavy. We gained about 3300 feet that afternoon before arriving at Phakding where we stayed. My guide did a great job and his English was excellent. It took me a bit to get used to his accent though. After two or three days hiking, I asked **Lahkpa** if there is anything people say when they want to pass on the trail. Porters are typically faster than the tourists. He told me, no, not really. The very next day, two guys were behind me, and Lahkpa was in front of me, and they clearly said, “Bojzu, Bojzu”. My guide and I stepped to the side, and I said, “Oh, is that what they say when they want to pass?” He looked down and then looked at me and said, “They said, ‘grandma, grandma.’” I laughed so hard. That was the funniest thing on the whole trip. This “grandma” wasn’t going fast enough for them. My guide and I taught each other new games, and we often played in the evening, sometimes with other trekkers and sometimes just the two of us.

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## Personals (cont.) by Pat Oakes

The only thing different for him was that we did not bet money. Apparently, any game played in Nepal is an opportunity to bet, whether it is volleyball, or cards.

We stayed in Tea Houses for the whole trek. These are places with a large community area with tables and chairs and rooms for trekkers. They serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There is no heat in the tea houses except for a wood (or dung) stove in the community area that is lit from about 4:30 – 6:30 every day. People come to get warm and then eat dinner. The rooms are small cubicles with two single platform beds and a foam mattress, and maybe a small table between the beds. They usually have a window, and often the window would ice over by morning from the moisture of my breath. In the morning you wake up, eat breakfast, and start hiking again. This is the daily schedule, hiking sometimes four hours and sometimes 9 hours. We were generally faster than the estimated time although I had no idea that I could walk so slowly and still be gasping for air. The most notable places were the ones with the highest elevation: Gokyo Ri at 17,600 feet, Cho La Pass at 17,800, Everest Base Camp at 17,600 feet and Kala Patthar at 18,500 feet. Each of these had their own particular challenges. Gokyo Ri was at the end of a long day, and it was windy and cold, but with a wonderful view. Cho La Pass was so steep in some places that there were cables to hold on to and pull yourself up. Everest Base Camp was not unusually challenging except that we had been going hard on prior days, so I was a little low on energy. It snowed on us coming down. Kala Patthar was the day after base camp, so there was snow covering the ground. The trail was hard to find, and it was slick. We started that one in the dark at 4 am using our headlamps. After these challenges, the hardest part was over. For the whole trek, 16 days, I had only two showers, but I never really felt gross, nor did I seem to stink. Maybe my nose stopped working! The recommended trekking list included wet wipes, which I did use, so that helped.

In the main valley to base camp, there were helicopters coming and going every few minutes. Anyone can go to basecamp. You just have to pay for the helicopter to take you there and back!

After Base Camp it was downhill on the main trail which is the most heavily used. Downhill was easier and generally faster except when the pack animals or lines of people were on the trail going the opposite way. At one point, the line of people

coming was as far as I could see along the trail. At one point there was a yak that had lost his footing and had fallen on the downhill trail. It was dead (very recently). He appeared to have broken his neck.

A few more days hiking down and we were back to Lukla. It was raining, so no helicopters or planes were coming or going. My flight was scheduled for the next morning. There were probably a hundred people who were supposed to leave that day but could not get out. They were very stressed about making their flight back home from Kathmandu. Eventually the weather cleared enough, and helicopters started flying first and later planes started flying.

Because of the route I chose, there were no other trekkers in my group. There were many other groups though and the tea houses were busy. Sometimes they were so busy that the guides had to sleep in the community area with only one blanket. The porters slept in other places and often only had one blanket between two people. Traveling as the only tourist in my group allowed me to really focus on the trip and even focus on each step, so I would not be thinking things like, “When do we get to the top of this hill so I can catch my breath?”, but instead thinking, “Yes, this is really hard and I am doing it. This is what I came here for. I am trekking in Nepal!” Of course, we went at my best pace!

The trek was physically demanding, and I was able to accomplish every challenge that I had hoped to accomplish. I do not feel the pull to go back but it was a wonderful trip. I’m so glad I did it.”



Pam crossing the Hillary Cable Bridge

Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes



Helicopter to Lukla



Pam with snowy Everest in the distance



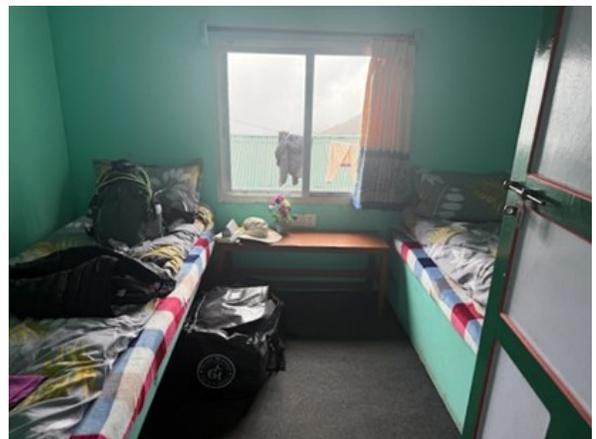
Porter carrying sheets of plywood and long rebar wrapped in a loop.



A genuine yak



Lahkpa, her guide, and Pam



Tea house room.

**Personals (cont.)  
by Pat Oakes**



Pam and Tenzing Norgay.