

VOL.1 NO.1

# Central Journal

Stories of Central Presbyterian Church

DEEP IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN AUSTIN · SINCE 1839

Dear family and friends of Central Presbyterian,

Life-story sharing began in earnest at Central during the summer of 2013. We were privileged to hear the stories of several members of our congregation as they told us about their life and faith experiences. Thus was born the idea of Central Faith Journal for Our Time to continue sharing our stories.

We learn in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, about Jesus as a master storyteller. He told those gathered at the lakeshore that we learn about the kingdom of God when we have ears to hear and eyes to see. The personal stories that follow contain both past events and present insights, all of which are a sliver of the kingdom in our midst.

May you treasure this opportunity to hear from those who worship and work with you at Central Presbyterian Church.

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*“I cannot run from God’s love.”*

# Bill Lytch

I have a hard time not crying when our church celebrates communion. Not serious rain drop tears, but I can’t help getting a little misty as I see the congregation moving towards the cross and returning to their seats. It’s as Joseph tells us, our table is a reflection of the kingdom of Heaven, where all are welcome and all are fed.

There is a Sunday school class that I can remember from early in my life where we talked about heaven and hell. The teacher didn’t tell us that there was no hell, but I remember thinking that if heaven is a place where the angels and saints spend eternity praising God then it would be a pretty awful place for a person who has turned away from God. Imagine having to spend every day unable to escape a God who you don’t believe in, or who you feel has hurt you and abandoned you in the past.

Both of my parents are ordained Presbyterian ministers so growing up we spent lots of time at church. We were at church every Sunday, from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., every Wednesday from 5:30 to 9:00, and any other time there was something going on. It was awesome. If you are the

preacher’s kid at a big steeple church there is tons to do and everyone knows who you are. You, quite literally, have the keys to the church. It is not hard to feel like you belong there. I had opportunities to think about my faith, but I was never challenged in what I believed.

As I went through my first two years of college, church fell off as a priority and my life still seemed to be going well. I was on my own and I was doing great. Grades were good, I had an awesome friend group, I was involved in cool extracurricular clubs, and we managed to sit in the front row for every home football game. I was so exhausted or hung over come Sunday morning that sleeping in was much more important than anything else. In fact having to get up and go to church seemed like, well, hell.

I still considered myself a church person, and definitely a Christian, mostly because I had not taken the time to think about it. That’s when I ended up going on a retreat through campus ministry at the end of my sophomore year. For the first time in two years I stepped away for a few days to think about who I was becoming, and what that all meant in the

## ... Bill Lytch

context of my relationship with God. I was doing just fine on my own, actually I was doing great, so on the second day of the retreat I decided that I no longer needed a relationship with God. The retreat had allowed for a lot of open, and honest, conversation about who you are and who God is and at that moment I made the conscious decision that maybe I had grown out of this whole “God thing.”

That’s when the leaders gave us letters that they had collected beforehand from our friends and family. The only thing that the writers were asked to do was tell us how they loved us. That much love overwhelmed me. After that I knew that it was impossible to hide from or lose the love of God, but as we got back to campus and back into our routines the whole church thing still wasn’t important. I knew that God loved me and I could not change that, and I did churchy things from time to time, but God and I did not have a relationship.

When I moved to Austin three years ago I went to Central so my mother would stop nagging me about trying out a church. I can no longer name the reason why I went back the next week, but I did. And then I went again and again. After about five weeks an email went out to the young/er adult group asking if anyone would consider being a youth sponsor. I wanted to sign up, but I thought that I should probably join the church if I was going to start getting involved. Something changed when I stood before the congregation and answered the membership questions. Through my relationship with the members and friends of Central I rekindled my relationship with God.

There is a phenomenon among people in their late 20s. When they find out that I go to church, they always feel the need to tell me why they don’t go to church. Sometimes I get the chance to explain to them why I go, and I tell them simply, “Because at my church we are a group of sinners. We are no worse than anyone else, and we are also no better. But we love each other and we do so for no other reason than because God loves us.”

That’s why I welcome the tears during communion, because in everyone’s face I feel the fulfillment of the promise that God really loves me. We are all sinners, but no one worse or better than any other. The many different kinds of diversity in our church deepen the truth of this. And in these faces I see the miracle of God’s love, that we will all have a place at God’s table in heaven.

I don’t actually know if all you do in heaven is praise God, and I secretly hope that I get to learn how to do something that would be impossible for me in real life like learn how to

play the guitar. But I still wonder on Sunday mornings: How can heaven be better than this?

When I was asked to write this I was a little unsure of what to share, because being only 26 I have yet to know so much of what I will believe in my life. These two things I have learned to be true though. First, I cannot run from God’s love. Second, while I will never be good enough to respond to that love always with a truthful “yes”, when I do it is possible to experience the kingdom of heaven right here in people on earth. Imagine that. ♪



*“I have been fortunate to belong to progressive congregations.”*

## Sandra Ward

I have been a Presbyterian all my life. My earliest memories go back to when I was 3-4 years old, sitting in church, leaning into my father’s or mother’s side with a protective arm around me, and listening to the scriptures, sermons and hymns. Of course, I’d have to stand up when everyone else did, and that helped me pay attention. Because of these childhood memories, worship in the sanctuary has always been a place where I feel safe and loved.

As I was growing up, my family moved a number of times. We belonged to Presbyterian Churches in Macon, GA, Warner Robbins, GA, Pittsburgh, PA, Overland Park, KS and Chesterfield, MO. This last church, Bonhomme Presbyterian Church, was the second oldest Presbyterian Church west of the Mississippi River. My sister and I were in the youth group there that restored the original “Old Stone Church.”

Our family was always active in the church. My parents were deacons and elders; we always went to Sunday School and pot luck suppers; my sister and I were in the children’s choirs, even though we couldn’t sing very well. My parents

took us with them when they visited the elderly members of the church. We would sit with the grown-ups during dinner and mind our manners! It was on one of these occasions that we were served lamb for the first time in our lives. My sister and I said “baa, baa, baa” in the back seat all the way home!

As you can see, church was a big part of my life while I lived with my parents. Then, I went off to college, Trinity University in San Antonio. Between studying, social activities and exploring Texas, who had time for church? So, all the good habits that were instilled in me from the cradle went by the wayside pretty quickly. Of course, I’d still go to church with my folks when I was home, and once again, enjoyed the safety and comfort of worship. But, when I returned to school, life got in the way.

Once I began my working life, it seemed that I was too busy to find a place in my life for church. I chose a career in the hotel business and often worked evenings and Sundays. After several years, I became “the boss,” and didn’t have to work every Sunday. I joined a small church in Arlington,

## ... Sandra Ward

VA, with a very compassionate and forward-thinking minister. Also, during that time, I met, and fell in love with, the man of my dreams. All was right with the world!

Then, everything came crashing down around me when the man I loved suddenly died. I was lost and adrift. Of course, I had the love and support of my family to keep me afloat, but their hearts were breaking for me. I don't know what I would have done without the church community that gathered around me. Since that time, almost 20 years ago, I have sought to be a contributing member to whichever church I joined. I have been fortunate to belong to progressive congregations where members' voices could be heard, different opinions respected and members are loved as children of God.

There are so many experiences I've had during my faith journey that I want to share with you over a cup of coffee or a bite to eat, and I hope I get to do so. But, for now, I look back to that little girl in the pew leaning against her parents, and give thanks to them for teaching her the importance of finding a place where she can be safe and loved. ♡



*“Presbyterian churches nurtured me as a child of God.”*

# Chuck Kreutz

I was baptized and confirmed in the First Presbyterian Church of Wichita Falls. My father was the church’s choir director and my mother the organist for over forty years. Both my mother and father were exceptional musicians who used their gifts to respond to the love of Jesus Christ. Because my parents owned a music store, sang and played for numerous weddings and funerals and were responsible for the music in the church, I regularly was farmed out to families who sang in the choir and were active in the church. The “foster parents” were role models who exemplified Christian service before I knew what that meant.

During college and law school, I sang in the choirs of First Presbyterian Church of Evanston, Illinois and Westminster Presbyterian Church in Austin. In 1973, Linda and I joined First Southern Presbyterian Church, now known as Central Presbyterian Church, where we have sung in the choir, served as youth group sponsors as well as deacons and elders. These Presbyterian churches nurtured me as a child of God and showed me what it means to be faithful.

The music of the church touches me deeply. I have been

fortunate to sing, play with and be led by church musicians of immense talent and heart. Through them, I have experienced a transcendence which only comes from music offered in response to God’s love and grace.

But most important to my faith formation has been the love of my family and the development of our shared faith in Jesus Christ. I have been blessed with parents who made Christian faith the center of our life together, and a wife and children who have been gifts from God. The church has continued to offer support and guidance as well as the opportunity to serve in response to God’s grace. Serving with other committed Christians is essential to sustaining my faith.

Thanks be to God! ♪



*“Wow, the Lord is good. He is real. He never changes.”*

# Chantal Mbaya

I was raised by my grandparents in Congo. God was appearing to me a lot in different ways. I used to think about how God looks, like where God comes from. I was really curious when I was little. My grandparents, they really helped me a lot with all my questions and they tell me every Sunday to go to church, to help people and to talk to people, read the Bible, pray all the time, fasting. I always asked people questions: Who is God? Why Jesus Christ – why He came like this? I was curious to know who is Jesus Christ, and the more I was asking people, the more I was thinking to grow up with my Christian faith. I especially thank God for my grandparents because they really pushed me to know who was Jesus Christ. They were telling me to stick with Jesus Christ all the time.

So I started just going to church like the way my grandparents told me to do, and it works! I started seeing that, wow, God is real and He was doing a lot in my life and my family. I remember in Congo, before the war, that it was hard for me and every time when I go to deliver a baby, it's like God is there with me because that pain is painful, but it

is between me and God. They say the doctors are there, but it's only Jesus Christ that helps to deliver the baby.

When the war started and the rebels took away my husband (Andre), I really see the hands of the Lord because when they was trying to kill all of us, there was one person in the group of rebels who was speaking my language, and he helped me. I don't think he was a rebel to me. He was like an angel God sent to us for him to save us because he said, “You have to leave the house before those people they come for a second time. Otherwise they will kill you both!” So we went to the Presbyterian church in Kalima where I grew up and they tried really hard to help us escape from Congo.

They found a truck driver who would take us out of Congo. He just knew we needed help and he would take us. We didn't know where we were going because we didn't speak his language. He was from South Africa so we thought we might be going there, but we didn't know. The truck driver, he was also like an angel to us because he could have done anything to us, but he was good with us. He was

## ... Chantal Mbaya

giving us food. Every time we came to a border (Congo, Zambia, Zimbabwe) he told us to lay down and he covered us with a blanket to hide us so they could not see us because we didn't have a passport or anything. Wherever he is – God bless him!

We were with the truck driver for about a week. I was praying a lot. I talked to God, “We don't know where we are going, but You know where we are going. Just take care about us.” Every single step I was doing, I say, “Wow, the Lord is good. He is real. He never changes.”

The truck driver left us on a street in a big city (Harare, Zimbabwe) in front of a building. We thought he told us he was going to buy gas for the truck and he would come back for us. We waited a long time for him to come back so we could continue the journey, but he never returned and we thought he had abandoned us.

I didn't know what the building was because I couldn't read English, I couldn't speak English. I only spoke French and Swahili. I didn't know about refugees at all and I didn't know that in Zimbabwe they were taking refugees. A guy came out of the building and ask us, but he was only speaking in English and Shona (a tribal language), so I couldn't respond. He went back in the building and found someone who spoke Swahili and then that person asked, “Where you guys coming from?” Then we knew the truck driver hadn't abandoned us – he left us near the office where they received refugees! It was God walking with us!

Those people took us in a car to the transition center in Harare where we stayed for about two months. I used to go to church a lot in the transition camp because we didn't have anything to do, so we used to go to church every morning and sing in the choir and pray a lot because I knew God had a plan for me.

Then they sent us to the big camp, Tongogara, which is far away out from Harare close to the Zimbabwe/South Africa border. It was not easy to get back to Harare, but when they sent us on a bus to Harare to do our (immigration) paperwork, I looked and saw a Presbyterian church near the office. I asked for permission to go to that church. The day I went there, it was a Tuesday, thank God the door was open and the pastor was there. I said, “I'm a refugee” and we started speaking Nyanza, a tribal language. He said, “I know the conditions in Tongogara are horrible. We're going to see what we can do for you in Harare.”

Later he sent us money for the transportation back to Harare and he put us in an apartment with two bedrooms. He gave me a job cleaning the church, outside and inside,

but it wasn't hard. It was just like he gave me a gift. Every month the church gave me the money to go back to Tongogara to get food rations for my family for a month. Sarah was born in a private hospital in Harare and the pastor paid for it. The children went to a good school in Harare because of the church. They were very good to us. We stayed in Zimbabwe for four years.

When you are in Africa when you hear about America, it's like wow! The day they told me I was coming to the United States, I know God is real. I really thank God for that!

My prayer was use us like the way You use King David and Jacob and all those prophets in the Bible. Give me the heart of doing for You, God, not for people. I want to do the same things Jesus Christ wants us to do. I pray to God to give me the heart to love all the babies (at the day care) the same. I see how powerful God is. God is using me because it is not easy for you to love someone else's child like the way I love all those babies. And I love all of them the same! That is how I keep my job at the day care. When I see myself working at the day care with those babies, I see how God's power is and He hears my prayer.

I love God. I love God, but I need to know Him more and more because I want to grow in my faith. I want to be saying the truth and working God's word, not people's word. One day I pray to God if he can touch me and start me preaching around the world and preaching about His name and His truth. ʘ



*“After a few Sundays we found something we didn’t know we were missing. We found a community.”*

# Kevin Crusier

What do you get when a Catholic girl marries a Methodist boy? A couple of confused Presbyterians. All kidding aside, when I was asked to write my story of faith for the CPC Journal my first reaction was to question the judgment of whoever made that decision. I have never considered myself to be a great example of how to be a Christian. As a matter of fact, I am quite sure many of my former Sunday school teachers would be horrified if they knew I was given a blank page in a church publication.

I grew up in a religious household. My parents were both school teachers and our family attended a Methodist church regularly. As a child I had complete faith in God. I prayed regularly and believed that my prayers were heard, if not answered. There is a peace and confidence that comes from unquestioning faith and I was a happy kid.

My parents taught at the School for the Blind here in Austin and they raised us with a strong belief in helping your fellow man. As children, my sister and I were regularly exposed to other children with physical disabilities. Our playmates, friends, and babysitters were often visually

impaired. It never seemed weird or different to hang out with disabled kids but I think we had a better appreciation for the unbalanced world we lived in. God certainly did not create a “level playing field”. At the same time we never felt pity or sorrow for our blind friends. We had one babysitter who could take the glass eyes out of her head. I mean, how cool is that!

Church was the center of my family’s life when I was a kid. We went to Sunday school. We sat in the second row every weekend at 11am. My dad played on the church softball team and my mom sang in the choir. When we were old enough, my sister and I joined the youth group. I loved going on retreats with the youth group. Life was good.

Somewhere along the way I got to be too cool for church. It just didn’t appeal to me anymore. I wanted to sleep in on Sunday mornings and I lost interest in talking to a God that wasn’t talking back. Youth group faded away and my faith faded into what could best be described as a lazy agnostic belief in something bigger than me. Church was way less important than girls, sports, girls, etc. College certainly

## ... Kevin Crusier

didn't help. I lived in Lubbock, Texas for seven years and I think I went inside a church once, but I never missed a football game.

I suppose this is the part where I tell you I felt empty inside and something was missing from my life. That would be dishonest. I loved those years. I had a great time. I was not a bad person (well at least I don't think I was). I treated people with respect and I think I had a decent moral compass. I did my best to be honest with myself and with other people. Mostly I just wanted to sleep in on Sunday mornings.

Something else kept me out of church for many years. To have attended church would be to tell a lie. I had lost my faith. I didn't believe in angels or prayer any more than ghosts or superstition. I was agnostic and I was pretty sure church wasn't the place for me.

When I got married nothing magical happened that turned me back to God. Brennan was Catholic though, so in order to get married in the Catholic Church I did endure a very long weekend where the Catholics gave it their best shot and made sure we were planning to have children. We obliged, but the birth of our boys did not do the trick either. Brennan and I and the boys were perfectly happy to enjoy our Sunday mornings at home as a family.

I'm not sure what happened but I think our laziness became too much to bear. Plus the kids were not letting us sleep in on Sunday mornings anymore anyway. It took a little while to get going but eventually we found ourselves at Central. Brennan's Uncle Andy and Aunt Nona (the Sansoms) were our excuse to go to church for a while, but after a few Sundays we found something we didn't know we were missing. We found a community.

I am not sure if my story is a shining example of what it means to be a Christian. I still don't have the unquestioning faith that I once had and I am pretty sure that angels and ghosts exist in about the same reality. What I do know is that when I am sitting in the second row of CPC on Sunday mornings (old habits die hard) and I hear the choir sing, see the children come forward, and listen to the wise words of our pastors, I know I am in a place filled with love and that gives me peace. ♪



*“I have lived a beautiful life. God has taken care of me all these years.”*

# Vera Ann Anderson

BY BARBARA LINDQUIST MILLER

These are the words of Vera Ann Engdehl Anderson just shy of her one-hundredth birthday. She shares her life story from her wheelchair at The Arbour at Westminster in Austin, Texas. She is now a diminutive woman. Her smile, curly white hair and soft eyes draw me in as I listen to her many remembrances. Her commitment to family, church and community come through powerfully as the memories flow

Vera Ann was born October 30, 1913 to Karen Karoline (Carrie) Hansen Engdahl and Carl John Engdahl in Taylor, Texas. Her parents emigrated from Denmark and Sweden as children and spent their adulthood in Taylor. The First Presbyterian Church, where her parents were deeply involved, was the faith center for the family. Vera Ann was baptized there as an infant. Participation in worship, Sunday School, Christian Endeavor, church camp in Kerrville, church celebrations and dinners ingrained Vera Ann into the Presbyterian way of experiencing the faith. Her par-

ents’ home was a haven of hospitality for family friends.

Family has always been a central value for Vera Ann. She revels in telling stories of times as a child when she spent time traveling to visit relatives. “Daddy took me from Taylor to Georgetown where I stayed with Aunt Signe. As an only child, I found it exciting to be with my cousins. On the trip home, Daddy would let me wade in the San Gabriel River.” Vera Ann knew early on that she wanted a large family when she grew up.

Her lifetime love of books, especially mysteries, maps and dictionaries, plus her deep interest in history and current events kept her on the growing edge of life. High school years were filled with activities that tell us about her interests. She was editor of the high school newspaper and entered multiple UIL contests in mathematics and science. After high school graduation as Salutatorian from Taylor High School, Vera Ann attended SMU for a year. Due to the financial crunch of the Depression, she finished her college education at The University of Texas at Austin, receiving a degree in history. Like many other female college graduates

## ... Vera Ann Anderson

of her day, she became a teacher.

After teaching for two years in Taylor, this lady was ready for a move.

“I decided to go to a bigger city, Corpus Christi, where there would be more opportunity to meet men,” Vera shared, laughing. “It worked! I became an active member of the young adult group at First Methodist church where I met Roland Anderson. We were married in 1940 in Taylor.”

This was followed by two more years of teaching and the birth of the Anderson’s first child, Karen in 1942. The new family continued their active participation in First Methodist Church but their lives changed dramatically with the eruption of World War II. Vera Ann and Karen followed Roland during his training in the military. They lived in Florida, Tennessee and Maryland before Roland “shipped out” to serve as an Army Captain in France. Back home in Taylor and living with her parents, son Roland was born in 1944 while his dad was overseas. Mike arrived in 1948 back in Corpus and Barbara was born in Houston in 1950.

Following the war, Roland’s employment as a marketing executive at the Gulf Oil Corporation meant that the pattern of relocation continued. Moves became normal for the family but were never easy. Vera Ann says that she cried every time they struck out for a new place.

“I lost dear friends and my many involvements in the community. Each move meant that I had to find a new church for the family (which was Methodist in those years), find new community involvements, discover new friends and assist my children as they adjusted to a new school and sought friends once again.”

Each time they moved, Vera Ann and Roland looked immediately for a new church. The congregation’s minister was always central to their decision. The criteria included finding a well educated man (no women pastors in those days), that wasn’t too evangelical and one who encouraged church members to think about their faith. The family’s last move was in 1955 to Fort Worth, where Vera Ann came back to her Presbyterian roots. She looks back on her fifty years at St. Stephens Presbyterian Church with fondness. “As I look back over my years, I realize that my Christian faith has become much more inclusive.”

Vera Ann recollects her own activities during those years. “I was active in the Women of the Church organization, was a women’s circle leader and a bible teacher. I spent many hours over the years in the church kitchen. Presbyterians are known for eating together habitually and

we kept up the tradition. I was also the wife of an Elder who was President of the Ushers and spent years giving his time to Christian Education leadership. We always had a good relationship with our ministers and often had them and friends from church to dinner in our home.” Her exquisite gift for hospitality often filled her home with family gatherings, dinners and parties for family, friends and Roland’s business colleagues. “Our big backyard was a great place for outdoor cooking, picnics and for children to run and play games,” she recalls. Vera Ann loved to cook and welcomed anyone into the kitchen to pitch in. “The more help, the better,” was her motto. Vera Ann had a gift for making guests feel at ease and free to be themselves.

Roland died in 1994 following eighteen years of dealing with Parkinson’s disease. Vera Ann was tireless in caring for him until he was moved to a Fort Worth nursing facility, and then one in Killeen, which was equipped to care for residents with dementia. She visited him regularly during his last three years. Vera Ann moved to Austin in 2005 to be close to family which now includes ten grandchildren and, (come February, 2014), fourteen great grandchildren.

Barbara, Vera Ann’s youngest child, reflects on her mother’s ability to adapt to any new situation. “She never complains about change. No matter what comes into her life, she looks at the future with a positive attitude. After some initial tears, she sets about living out the new scenario with gusto. Adaptability and resilience are definitely her strongest traits.” Despite her physical limitations, she continues to inspire others with her openness and subtle humor. ♡