FEBRUARY 2026 VOLUME 24 ISSUE 2

THE NUGGET

Open Door United Church of Christ

Whoever you are,
Wherever you are on life's journey,
You are welcome here.

February is Black History Month





Interim Thoughts

As I write this column for *The Nugget*, I am mindful that we are seeing hopeful signs in our nation.

- Think local: here in Murphys, we had almost 80 people gathered on all four corners at the traffic light on Route 4. Many thanks to those who organized this protest, and especially to those from our church who are at the center of the action. We know that many of you who are not able to attend in person are with us in spirit, praying for our nation and for our local community.

- Five year old Liam Conejo Ramos, pictured below, still in his blue bunny hat, has been freed, along with his father (an asylum seeker from Equador)—lawyers working on their behalf filed a writ of habeus corpus, and ancient judicial principle forbidding the government from holding anyone in custody without providing a legally tenable reason for doing so.



5 year old Liam Conejo Ramos, in his blue bunny hat, standing in the January cold of Minnesota with the hand of a federal officer gripping his Spider-Man backpack.

- On Saturday, a federal judge in Texas granted their petition, freeing them. Meanwhile, my friends and clergy colleagues in Springfield, Ohio are celebrating another legal decision blocking the current Administration from ending protection for their Haitian neighbors.
- Jesus of Nazareth—himself a refugee, along with his parents—stood beside young Liam Conejo Ramos and his dad, in the form of many people of good will who worked for their release. God will not give up on God's world. Freedom is coming, oh yes it is!



Liam Conejo Ramos and his dad boarding a plane after their release from a Texas detention center

On a personal note, February has always been the most important month of the year for me:

- February 9 is my birthday
- February 14 is Valentine's Day
- February 18 is Resea's birthday
- February 26 is my daughter Jae's birthday

In addition to these festive occasions, February is also the month when my older brother Thomas (affectionately known as Tommy) was killed in a bizarre accident outside our home in Yonkers, New York. Tommy's death had a profound effect on me and is the source of much of my writing.

I suppose one could say that Tommy's death compelled me to become both a writer and a philosopher, in a quest to understand (in the Augustinian sense). Faith seeks understanding. To get a sense of what his death meant, and means to me, you can follow these links to personal essays I have written, excerpts from my memoir-in-progress:

https://www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/21751-thecount
https:/www.thesunmagazine.org/articles/23971-some-notes-on-fathers-and-sons

Speaking of writing, I am grateful to *The Christian Century* magazine, which has supported my work for many years. Here is an article by the magazine's poetry editor, Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, featuring one of my recent poems, and commentary on it.

Carpenter's Lullaby

"I consider Saint Joseph the special patron of all those forced to leave their native lands because of war, persecution and poverty." ~ Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*

Sleep, child, in this manger rude and small
The world will quickly claim you
Soon you will grow tall

From my workshop I have saved
Adze, auger, awl, and blade
Beneath your pillow and your pall

Herod's assassins will not find you
I vowed to guard you in this stall
Papa knows your future, but has Mary told me all?

Forget the madness
Chaos, sadness
In the city, in the wild
For this night you are my child

The road goes on from here
I cannot tell you where
Papa must know what's best
But miles to go before you rest

Baby, close your eyes I pray
Please don't look on me that way!
Is it you who'll save the day?

Sleep, child, in this manger small.
The world will quickly claim you.
No assassin, no betrayal
Joseph guards you in this stall

Gary Percesepe portrays Joseph as Christ's protector in this lullaby which Joseph sings, referring presciently to many of the major events of Christ's life. This is the Nativity, with the holy child sleeping in a manger into which Joseph has also put his carpentry tools under the pillow and the pall, the funeral cloth for a coffin. The Child has just been born, but his crucifixion and death on a cross—made, no doubt, by a carpenter—is an inseparable part of this Nativity story.

Herod's slaughter of the innocents is occurring, and the poem's epigraph refers to the flight into Egypt. Joseph vows to protect the child from all danger. He knows somehow that "the world will quickly claim you," as it did and does every day since—the world in which he "will save the day."

The poet does not write this poem in a poetic vacuum. He quotes Frost's "Stopping by Woods": "Papa must know what's best / But miles to go before you rest." That often quoted line from Frost takes on special resonance here. But there is also an echo of another poet's lines as human doubt worms its way into both poems —this time W. H. Auden in his Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being*. Percesepe writes, "Papa knows your future, but has Mary told me all?" Auden writes:

Mary may be pure,
But, Joseph, are you sure?
How is one to tell?
Suppose for instance... Well...

The tradition in many Christmas poems since the 17th century has been to link the Nativity with the Crucifixion, Christmas with Good Friday. This is no Hallmark Christmas special. We see the human in Joseph and in the Child. The world suffers but will be redeemed. Joseph knows. ~ Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, Poetry Editor, *The Christian Century*.

In other news, I'm delighted to announce that I will be the Keynote Speaker at the 2nd Annual Motherlode Book Festival, to be held June 5-6 in downtown Sonora. Here is a link to the event, for those interested in attending: https://motherlodebookfestival.com

I will be giving the Keynote Address on Saturday evening, June 6, on the topic: "Beyond Self-Censorship: One Writer's Journey." The workshop I'm offering on June 5th is called "Notes from a Working Editor: How to Publish Your Writing and Get Paid for It."

Eight of my books will be on display at the Book Festival, available for purchase and signing. If interested, I hope you'll make plans to attend!

February 18 is Ash Wednesday and marks the beginning of Lent. A joint ecumenical service will be held on Ash Wednesday at Faith Lutheran Church at 12 Noon, with the "imposition of ashes." If you would like to receive ashes, I hope to see you there! We are grateful to Rev. Karen Johnson, pastor of Faith Lutheran, and her church, for hosting this event.

One of the most exciting features of Interim Pastoral Ministry is watching a church come to a deeper understanding of its mission, and the process of discerning that mission in community.

Our Church Council has scheduled a Council Retreat for February 21st. This one-day retreat will be held at the Diggins Clubhouse. The Retreat will focus on the critically important topics of mission and stewardship. Our Church Council has invited Open Door members to attend the retreat, and I sincerely hope that many of you will come and participate!

I will be taking a few days off to celebrate birthdays this month. I'm so grateful to Reverends Mickey & Penny, who will preach and lead worship on February 8th. Make sure you do all that you can to be in worship this Sunday, and throughout the month. In these days of national testing, it's important to cling to our most deeply held values, and to hold one another close, in the bonds of love. Grace and peace to all of you.

Faithfully,

Gary



Tuning in With Our Music Director

Black History Month is February 1 through March 1, so we will have lots of opportunities to delve into the rich heritage of African American music. The choir is working on "The Storm Is Passing Over," a joyful song published by Charles Albert Tindley in 1905. Tindley was a Methodist minister and hymn writer. He was born a freeman in 1851 in Berlin, Maryland. He had no formal education, and taught himself to read. While he was working as the sexton at Bainbridge Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia he studied Hebrew at a nearby synagogue. He then went on to study Greek, taking a correspondence course through Boston Theological School. Without a formal degree he qualified for ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church by examination. He eventually became the minister of the Bainbridge Street Methodist Episcopal Church where he had been the sexton. When he began as minister the membership was 130. Over time the congregation grew to a multiracial congregation of over 10,000 souls.

"The Storm Is Passing Over" gained in popularity when Donald Vails released a gospel arrangement of the song on his album "Yesterday, Today, and Forever" (1985).

Tindley's composition, "I'll Overcome Someday," is credited as being the basis for the Civil Rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

Lent begins on February 18 with a noon Ash Wednesday service at Faith Lutheran Church. According to Father Richard Rohr, "repent" (or metanoia in Greek) means to turn around, to change. Here is a poem by Harmony Harrison:

SHADOWS

Before me,
only shadows.

If this is true,
then it follows:

Behind me,
only light.

Slowly
I begin
to turn.

MUSICAL SANCTUARY:

The topic for the February Musical Sanctuary is "All Heart." The All Heart meditation is a colorful visualization where we draw heart energy to all of the energy centers. A beautiful way to enjoy vibrant aliveness. The deep relaxation and openness brought on by the Connect & Glow practice helps the release of patterns of tension, and supports personal growth. This self-healing technique is suitable for beginning as well as seasoned practitioners.

People who have participated in Musical Sanctuary know that I like to read favorite passages related to the theme, and I have more material for All Heart than any other meditation. This is a favorite passage from The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World by Dalai Lama:

"A scientifically controlled study conducted by German researchers at the University of Kassel has shown that while the chest area of an average person emits only 20 photons of light per second, someone who meditates on their heart center and sends love and light to others emits an amazing 100,000 photons per second. That is 5000 times more than the average human being. Numerous studies have also shown that when these photons are infused with a loving and healing intent, their frequency and vibration increases to the point where they can literally change matter, heal disease, and transform negative events.Ten minutes of meditating on compassion, on kindness for others, and you will see its effects all day. That's the way to maintain a calm and joyous mind." So, if you can't make it to Musical Sanctuary on February 25, you can spend a few minutes breathing into your heart!

Moderator's Message



What exciting times we are living in the life of our church! While I know many of us are burdened and saddened by much of the national and international news, we only need to look around and among us for positive activity and reasons to hope.

First, our new name, Open Door UCC, has been approved by the state! While there is more work to do changing the name at the bank etc, this is a huge accomplishment by Barb Olivier and her team, and we thank them!

There is a planning team consisting of Mickey Williamson, Pastor Gary, Darlene Davis, myself, Barb Olivier and Judy Regalia working diligently to design a church retreat day on February 21 st , from 9 am to 4 pm at the Murphys Diggins. The retreat will address the complex questions of "Who are We as a church?" and "Where are we going in these challenging times?" in the morning session. We'll break for a potluck lunch at noon and the afternoon session will consist of discussion of stewardship – what is it? How well have we been growing giving hearts? There will likely be some discussion of planned giving, fundraising, and grant availability to help enhance revenue as part of the PM session. Both sessions will use small group discussion to glean input on these topics. If you are interested in a more robust exploration of fundraising, please let Jenny know.

We will most likely have a group to work exclusively on fundraising ideas in the future.

The morning session of the retreat will (we hope) yield information for our pastor search team in putting together our church profile. ALL ARE WELCOME to attend all or part of this day! It's an exciting opportunity to help us discern where we're going and how we seek a settled pastor to help us get there, so we hope you will come. There's a sign-up sheet in the social hall to help us plan for numbers and food. Looking forward to seeing you in worship as we celebrate the life of our church. The sermons Pastor Gary has been delivering are incredibly stimulating and appropriate for our times. You won't want to miss a single one! We are stronger together, and with love and giving hearts, we will continue to thrive. Come join us!

Carrie Shinn, Moderator



Treasurer's Report

Thank you for your generous donations at the end of 2025. We received about $10,000 in additional funds that have contributed to our carry over for 2026. By this time we will have a new 2026 Budget. I am looking forward to our all church retreat on February 21st so we can discuss the mission of the Church and how we can continue to be financially responsible. Everyone is welcome, so please attend. If you have any questions about the Budget , please don't hesitate to call.

Thanks, Patty

Christian Education Recap

Sunday School has been busy learning about Jesus through the stories of Matthew. The Faith Links for these lessons are: bringing our cares to Jesus, following Jesus, building a strong faith foundation and God's kingdom is a growing treasure. Students are enjoying the dry weather and the games outside. Patty

Member Spotlight



Open Door member, Sidney Palmer has been honored by the Murphys Thrift Store and Senior Center for 10 years of faithful service to her community. Her contributions include collecting and distributing children's books, toys, and personal care supplies for children and families through both Calaveras and Tuolumne crisis centers. In addition, she supports the animals at the shelter by Repairing sold throw aways and repurposing them for dog blankets. She is a beloved inspiration to those who know and work with her.

Do you know someone from our church who works to make a difference and carry out the values and mission of our church? You can nominate for our Member Spotlight column! Please contact the church office by phone or email and let us know!

ANNOUNCEMENTS & EVENTS



KNITTERS NEEDED!

The Knitters and Hookers prayer shawl ministry group is in need of knitters to make the precious Prayer Shawls that are lovingly made for folks in need. While you are welcome to attend their monthly gathering on the 4th Wednesday of every month, attendance is not necessary. Please contact Liz Tussey for more details.



THE PLANNING TEAM IS HOSTING AN ANNUAL PLANNING RETREAT SATURDAY, FEB. 21 FROM 9AM - 4PM AT THE MURPHYS DIGGINS CLUBHOUSE. THERE IS A SIGN UP SHEET IN THE SOCIAL HALL. ALL ARE WELCOME!

CALIFORNIA WIC | CDPH

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), in partnership with the California Department of Public Health and The Resource Connection, will be distributing resources on Thursday, Feb. 12 from 9am to 4pm in the Social Hall.

Poet's Corner

This month in Poet's Corner we look at a poem written by Jane Zwart, and commented on by Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, poetry editor at The Christian Century magazine. First the poem, then the commentary:

Antichrist
by Jane Zwart



The freefall of God: he skydives into an egg,
infinity supersaturating a life cycle. You know
the story: shepherds keep watch by night
while Christ hatches his own infancy.
The opposite of incarnation is apotheosis.
This is how you will know the Antichrist:
not because he's charring the air in a snakeskin
suit or trying to shoot God out of the sky.
Isn't it always us, after all, hatching deicides
while fallen angels sunburn? No, watch
for the fool who flays his own flesh. Watch
for the liar who shoots himself into the sky.

The image in the first two lines of Jane Zwart's poem is a stunning description of the conception of Christ as announced to Mary by Gabriel. The poet envisions the process as something like IVF: God skydiving into an egg carried by Mary, "supersaturating a life cycle." In high school chemistry lab I remember the miracle of adding copper sulfate to hot water, stirring to dissolve it, and then waiting a week or so to find beautiful blue crystals that had formed in the supersaturated solution.

The last line of that first stanza echoes Christ's statement to Jerusalem: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (Luke 13:34). Christ mothers himself, as only God can, "hatch[ing] his own infancy."

This freefalling, skydiving God is not the antichrist, Lucifer, the fallen angel who wanted to become God. Incarnation is God come down to earth. Apotheosis is the deification or elevation of someone. We look for hackneyed signs of the Antichrist in the air: the snakeskin, the attempt to kill God. ~

The poet corrects the mistaken, overused symbols. The ones attempting to kill God? We are the ones who hatch these deicides. And look not for the snake but for fools and liars, the latter "shoot[ing] himself into the sky"—not incarnation but apotheosis. ~ Jill Peláez Baumgaertner

Cherishing our members, friends, and community...



HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

Rev. Gary Percesepe 9
Angela Patterson 9
Paula Smith 11

Resea Percesepe 18
Vena Graves 19
Abby Fuqua 22
Tari Takara 27

Tracey Ellifritz 12
Carol Dougherty 14
Shad Sundberg 16
Monika Riedel 18

Don't see your birthday listed? We promise it isn't on purpose! If you would like to have your special day listed in the newsletter, please call or email the church office.

Prayer List

The scriptures tell us:

"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Jesus Christ."
Philippians 4:19

We continue to witness the stories of how God answers our prayers!
God hears our cries and answers them.
Let us pray daily for the following members and friends of our community:

Carl Smith
Barbara Olivier
Lisa Shinn
Gene Davis (Ron & Darlene Davis)
Faye Morrison
Miriam Thorsen)
Shoshana (Laura Leonard)
Jodie Gibson
Lauren, Gordon, Emre, Willow (Jesse Hampton)
Angela Patterson
Tracey Ellifritz
Tabitha Kremesec
Shirley Soderer
Bonnie & Chuck (Mark McCormick)
Terry Dowell
Robin Chesnut
Tari Takara
Ben Richardson (LaMonts)
Bruce (Miriam Thorsen)
Dodi Horvath
Brian Whitehead (Nancy Burton)
Rev. John Randlett
Rev. Marty Williams

February 2026



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal *Holy Communion* **11am** Small Group leader mtg., EEC	**2** **6:30pm** Al-Anon	**3**	**4** **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **10am** Worship mtg. Zoom **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	**5**	**6** **12pm** Women's AA **2pm** First Fridays	**7** **10am** Vocal Choir rehearsal
8 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal	**9** **1:30pm** F&F mtg., **5:30pm** South Grove Bunch **6:30pm** Al-Anon	**10** **12:30pm** CE mtg., Zoom	**11** **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	**12** **9am - 4pm** WIC in Social Hall	**13** **10am** The Wanderers **12pm** Women's AA	**14** **10am** Bell Choir rehearsal **Valentine's Day**
15 **9am** Vocal Choir rehearsal **11am** Council mtg., EEC	**16** ***STAFF HOLIDAY OFFICE CLOSED*** **6:30pm** Al-Anon **President's Day**	**17** **10:30am Family** Connections. EEC **12:30PM** M&C mtg., Fisk **5:30pm** The Seekers	**18** **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **12pm** Ash Wednesday service at Faith Lutheran **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	**19** **10am** Faith & Friends	**20** **12pm** Women's AA	**21** **9am - 4pm** Church Planning Retreat at Murphys Diggins Clubhouse
22 *NEW MEMBER CEREMONY!*	**23** **6:30pm** Al-Anon	**24**	**25** **8:15am** Morning Prayer, Zoom **5:30pm** Musical Sanctuary **12:30pm** AA **6:30pm** AA	**26**	**27** **12pm** Women's AA	**28** **10am** Bell Choir rehearsal

Pastor Gary will be out of town from Feb. 9 - 14

THE NUGGET

First Congregational Church of Murphys
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

DATED MATERIAL - DO NOT DELAY
FEBRUARY 2026

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Webpage: www.fccmurph.org
God's love echoes through us to all creation.

Staff
Interim Pastor Rev. Dr. Gary Percesepe
Pastor Emeritus Rev. Dr. John Randlett
Music Director Kate Moody
Secretary Jenny Fuqua
Custodian Lucie Tardif
Christian Ed Director Patty Haskell
Childcare Abby Fuqua

Officers
Moderator Carrie Shinn
Vice Moderator Barbara Olivier
Treasurer Patty Haskell
Assistant Treasurer Alan Horvath

www.ucc.org

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, MURPHYS MISSION STATEMENT
We believe that all people are beloved by God and we strive to serve as a welcoming and nurturing church community to discern the Bible with insight for today and to live out Christ's teachings.

The Nugget Committee invites you to submit articles of interest and wishes to stress that the deadline is always the 20th of each month.
The Committee reserves the right to edit submissions for length and content.