Three United Methodist pastors and their delight in ministry

A visit to three congregations around Austin, Texas

by Jason Byassee in the June 5, 2019 issue

Pastor Taylor Fuerst giving the children's sermon at First United Methodist Church of Austin. Photo by Mary Heckmann.

Near where I work, there is a pastor of a newly flourishing church who wears a kilt. I am not saying the kilt is key to his ministry, but my sense is that it makes him happy—and that a delighted minister is better positioned to reach out to a world jaded about or hostile to faith.

I thought of this pastor while I was visiting Austin, Texas, recently. Delight in ministry appears to be key to the flourishing of several United Methodist

congregations in the area.

First UMC of Austin comes straight out of central casting for a downtown church. The main building is a grand lookalike of the US Supreme Court building. Lawyers use First UMC's ornate Greek Revival columns as a backdrop for their website photos. The church sprawls across two blocks of prime real estate with the Texas state capitol looming behind it. Anne Richards, the former governor of Texas, was a longtime member at First, and the church has many other politicians as members. For decades the church was where people went to put in an appearance. "One of my older ladies still harasses me when I don't wear lipstick," pastor Taylor Meador Fuerst said.

But for newlyweds Sarah and Emily Tooker, First UMC is a place where they are accepted and can contribute. When communion bread ran low the day I was there, Fuerst asked for Sarah's aid—"I did it because she was wearing antlers," Fuerst joked, referring to Sarah's Christmas-themed attire.

First UMC of Austin made headlines in 2017 when it decided that it would not solemnize any marriages until gay and lesbian people could wed in Methodist churches. "We don't want to do ministry for anybody that we can't do for everybody," Fuerst told a local TV station. First UMC is fasting from weddings until all can feast.

Though Sarah and Emily could not marry at the church, they still raved about the premarital counseling they received at First UMC. "Dave Ramsey's DVDs on money and marriage taught us a lot," Sarah said with just a hint of gushing.

"Dave Ramsey?" I said. "The conservative radio show host?

"Yeah, they warned us about that," Emily said, with a shrug that suggested they weren't interested how Ramsey is categorized.

This willingness to draw on resources without regard to political or social affiliation is part of First UMC and Pastor Fuerst's charm. All wisdom is from God, they seem to say, who generously leaves it for us in unlikely places.

Fuerst studied at Duke Divinity School with Stanley Hauerwas, and her experience left her keen not to be pigeonholed in the theological or political left or right.

“I’m trying to introduce my church full of unitarians to N. T. Wright and Sam Wells,” she said. The goal is not to have more correct theological ideas in anybody’s heads but to refocus attention on Jesus and on the Bible. “Jesus is where you get right belief and behavior,” Fuerst said.

When Texas bishop Janice Huie recruited Fuerst to the Houston area in 2007, only 4 percent of clergy in that conference were under age 35. Huie appointed young pastors to prominent pulpits and supported them. “In 2012 we had grown to 10 percent clergy under 35, so it’s working,” Fuerst said. And First UMC is growing: it has 100 new people since it took its public stance on marriage, many by profession of faith or baptism rather than transfer.

The church’s inclusiveness is one reason for the growth. A second is the quality of Fuerst’s preaching. A third is the church’s ministry to Austin’s increasing poor population. First UMC feeds breakfast to 300 homeless people twice a week, and it hosts a food truck for the hungry that has ten teams from First UMC volunteering regularly. A church that once bragged about its legislators and debutantes now boasts of the protests it participates in: “We had a party to make posters for the Women’s March and expected 50 people. Five hundred came,” Fuerst said.

Not all response to their work has been positive. Fuerst tells me that she has received more than a few hateful as well as critical emails and comments from trollers on the Internet. The criticisms have largely come from outside the community in response to the church’s stance on homosexuality. But Fuerst takes them in stride. “My favorite hater wrote me this warning: ‘Jesus is near.’ I laughed out loud. ‘A-mayan’!” she says, in an exaggerated Texas drawl.

While Fuerst is passionate about equality for LGBTQ people in the church, she isn’t impatient to leave the denominational structures, like some of her colleagues are. Even after a special general conference in February affirmed the church’s prohibition against same-sex marriage, Fuerst feels that in the long run there will be full acceptance and equality for LGBTQ people in the Methodist Church. “In the meantime,” she said, “we’ll continue to see ourselves as Jesus’ merry band of troublemakers” and live out a different brand of evangelical Methodism.

Up the road from First UMC, another United Methodist congregation is flourishing in a very different environment. Bee Creek UMC is a church plant in a conservative community. The church’s campus is made up of individual cabin-like buildings, each

of hill country limestone. The impressive campus left the young congregation a million and a half dollars in debt when Pastor Laura Heikes arrived in 2010. That debt is no more, and the church just finished a $1.5 million recreation center intended for the whole community and built debt free.

When I visited, 500 chairs had been set out for Christmas Eve service. “They think that’s too many,” Heikes said of the ushers, “but we’ll see.” Her tone suggested the chairs would be filled.

Last year Bee Creek received 46 new members, half of them new believers. Bee Creek has an outdoor amphitheater with a breathtaking view of the Pedernales River Basin below, and the landscape plays an important role in the life of the church. Several times a year, Heikes baptizes new believers outside in a horse trough.

A local man gave Heikes a bottle of wine as a gift after she preached a sermon on first fruits. It later exploded in her office, going off like a gunshot. When she warned him that his wine bottles were exploding, he mumbled, “They’ve been doing that.” An artist in the community turned the wine stain on the wall and the ceiling into a tree by a river, in response to a sermon on Psalm 1.

Heikes’s own preaching is one key reason the church is growing. Her voice has both honey and rye in it, with the intimacy and wisdom of a late-night DJ connecting with lonely highway drivers. Preaching on the lament psalms recently, she observed that ancient Israelites poured out their pain to God without restraint, “and those prayers became worship songs.” When Heikes’s two-year-old son, Asher, recently fell and hurt his knee, she frantically searched for an injury, but the boy just wanted her to hold him. “Y’all, I could let him do that all day. It doesn’t hurt me at all that he’s screaming in my ear. You are God’s precious child. He will hold you while you scream.”

For a series on finding God in unexpected places, Heikes took suggestions from the congregation on the most daring places where she could seek the divine. Her parishioners led her to preach on looking for God at a bar where people danced in cages. She arranged with the local police to get arrested, so she could seek God from behind bars. “The cops were in on the sermon series,” she explains, “but the people watching me cuffed didn’t know that.”

But the series wasn’t only about finding God in extreme places. In one remarkable sermon, she preached on “finding God in line.” First, she named the agitation we all

feel in traffic or at the bank. Then she wondered whether that might be time for prayer. Jesus asked his disciples to stay awake with him in Gethsemane. “Maybe these little moments of waiting prepare us for those big ones.”

In this conservative community, strong preaching is important: “I preach from scripture. I want to figure out what the text says and obey. So if folks are OK with my being a woman, I’ll get them into the scriptures.”

Heikes has natural gifts as a preacher, but she also works at her craft, putting in dozens of hours a week and arranging three annual retreats to plan ahead.

“We have got to retire the Saturday night special,” she said of her fellow pastors who turn to the sermon on the night before worship.

When she realized that one of her parishioners, Richard Jenson, teaches public speaking to his fellow lawyers, she asked if he would help her with sermon preparation. Heikes practices her sermon for a congregation of one, and Jenson gives her feedback on timing, gestures, even theology.

“I was terrified at first,” she said. He was too, he insists. But he noticed things right away. For example, he noted that when Heikes welcomed new members, she would shrink physically, defying her words of welcome with body language expressing unease. She realized he was right. “I’d seen other churches welcome people to join too casually,” she said. “I wanted to prepare people so they’d know their vows,” and her body language reflected her fear rather than her welcome.

I was struck by the attention Heikes pays to the details of the service. She has even innovated the most wretched part of any church service: the announcements. When I was there, the ninth-grade girls’ basketball team at the local high school read the announcements, interspersed with a video of them making trick shots. “I’ve had the fire department read them, the preschool kids,” she said. Suddenly the most moribund part of a service is the most fun. “The problem is people are not listening; it’s too cute,” she laughs, not much caring.

She also insisted, against my vehement objection, that children’s sermons still have a place in church. “You know why? Because only when I can explain my sermon to a child is it ready. If I can’t do that yet, I have more work to do.”

The congregation has responded to Heikes's commitment with commitments of their own, creating a vibrant dynamic. "Laura is very hard to say no to," one lay leader said. Heikes describes her long tenure as a strength. "I know now who can come alongside me. That's why I'm effective."

Bee Creek recently reorganized its administrative structure from multiple committees into one small executive group. Multiple committees were hindering progress. There might have been pushback earlier in her tenure, but the trust she had built over time allowed this more streamlined approach.

Heikes comes from San Antonio and studied to be a missionary at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. She responded to an altar call after she audibly heard God say "be my minister." "I was sure I'd never go out on another date again," she said. When her preferred missionary destination of Costa Rica didn't work out, she found herself a pastor back in Texas. "I learn the language and the local culture and what's good news here. It's delightful to be a missionary in your own culture."

Heikes hopes that a vibrant ministry can create a church that stretches across the normal fault lines. When I asked about her public silence on LGBTQ issues, she said, "People have accused me of being a coward." But she pointed out that a lesbian serves on the church board, and she has been preaching for months on inclusion.

"The Holy Spirit needs to move, and we need to count on the Spirit to do so. I've seen folks change their minds," she said, through a patient presentation of the scriptures and folks' experience. She pointed to the story in Acts 6:7 of "many of the priests" believing because the church addressed its internal divisions in such a grace-filled way. "That's what I pray for."

After the special general conference vote, the chair of Bee Creek UMC expressed a viewpoint shared by Heikes: "If one group is excluded, we are all diminished."

From Bee Creek's vista, I went back to Austin, to South Lamar Boulevard, one of Austin's hipster hangouts. That's the site of the newest United Methodist church in the area: Austin New Church.

"I am a delighted United Methodist," Austin New Church pastor Jason Morriss said. Who loves their denominational apparatus that much? Refugees from another denomination, that's who—those who've been given a coveted building, funding, and a pat on the back, rather than the inquisitor's glare.

When I spoke to Morriss after the vote of the special general conference, he had moderated his enthusiasm. “I’m a proud Wesleyan,” Morriss clarified, “but that doesn’t mean I’m a proud United Methodist at the moment. Frankly, I’m embarrassed.”

Austin New Church was founded seven years ago as a Free Methodist congregation by Brandon and Jen Hatmaker. Both of the Hatmakers are evangelical authors and luminaries—she especially. Her books have been on the *New York Times* best-seller list, she fills stadiums, and the Hatmakers starred in a faith-based reality TV show. Jason Morriss and his wife, Allison, had both read and admired her work during his time at Lakewood Church, Joel Osteen’s church in Houston.

Morriss graduated from Northern Seminary outside Chicago. Because he had grown up as a missionary kid from Mexico, he was hired by Lakewood to launch Spanish-speaking small groups. He was the only MDiv holder on Osteen’s massive staff. He often has to defend this association with Osteen’s prosperity-gospel form of Christianity. He says Osteen offers the simplest form of the gospel: what is preached had better be good news for all listening, nothing more or less. But it wasn’t long before Morriss wanted a more community-based form of church.

In 2013 Morriss called the Hatmakers on a lark, the two couples met, and soon after Morriss and Allison moved to Austin to participate in the church while Morriss worked for the Free Methodist denomination. Eventually, Morriss took over the leadership of Austin New Church.

In 2016, Jen Hatmaker made waves in the evangelical world by telling a journalist about her welcoming stance toward gay and lesbian people. The next several months were rocky for the Hatmakers and for Austin New Church. Hatmaker had speaking engagements canceled, and bookstores boycotted her books. Because of the close association between the Hatmakers and Austin New Church, many people in the church left in protest. The Free Methodists asked Morriss to either resign or renounce Hatmaker’s stance. He refused, and the church was asked to leave the denomination.

It found a new home in the UMC with Bishop Robert Schnase. “He likes that we’re nonliturgical, gospel-driven, and welcome to all,” Morriss said. For his part, Bishop Schnase says that he appreciates ANC’s “deeply Wesleyan ethos.” The Rio Texas Conference not only received ANC as a congregation but also handed over the

building of Faith United Methodist, a struggling congregation. Suddenly ANC had a footprint in the coolest part of south Austin.

The church recovered quickly. “Because of Jen’s renown, we always had a new flow of people,” Morriss told me. And many of the newcomers were those who had felt exiled elsewhere.

Lindsey Leaverton was a well-known local musician who had been kicked out of three churches after she came out in 2009. When ANC itself took a public stance on homosexuality, the church hired her. “I never thought I would lead worship again,” she said. “I cried halfway through it.” The night I heard her lead music, she growled out a line from the Christmas ballad “O Holy Night” that made me hear the song in a new way: “and in his name all oppression shall cease.” She insists that more evangelical leaders and congregations will follow ANC’s lead, joining evangelical zeal with inclusion: “More are coming. I guarantee it.” Jen Hatmaker is more restrained: “I’m hopeful for more spaces that are wider, safer, broader, but granted, I’m a hopeful person,” she told me. ANC has leveraged its inclusivity, positioning itself at Austin’s Pride Parade with signs offering “Dad hugs,” “Mom hugs,” and “Pastor hugs.”

Both Heikes and Fuerst reported to me that their bishop and district superintendent have taken heat for closing Faith UMC and giving its building to newcomers. Yet I could see the fruit of their decision: attendance exceeded fire code rules the Sunday I was there, 370 with chairs only for 345, in one of two services that day. “The church is only one thing we do here,” Morriss said. But the church’s concert venue is much larger than most of the tiny ones in Austin, America’s live music capital. ANC does so courtesy of a six-figure gift from the United Methodists for state-of-the-art sound equipment.

For a nonliturgical church, ANC is striking for its openness to Catholic liturgical and devotional practice. It offers communion every Sunday, and Morriss draws on his background in Mexico to introduce people to the tradition of the saints. Morriss traces his commitment to the Eucharist to his professor Robert Webber at Northern: “I don’t care what you think is happening in the Eucharist. Get your ass to the altar every time it’s offered,” he reported Webber as saying. I heard Morriss preach on Mary, using his upbringing in Mexico, where he was enchanted by the one he calls “la cariña” (a Spanglish word for darling). “In the 512 [Austin’s area code], when she sings, we shiver. The empire is over, the lowly are promoted. That’s the gospel.

She’s a child that births a song that births a child. Humility is a magnet for the enduring gaze of God.”

ANC also speaks more clearly in denunciation of America’s unjust practices at the border than any church I’ve heard. Members led by Allison Morriss regularly head to the border or Austin’s bus stations with money, food, water, and kindness for refugees. “We have to be engaged on the other side of the border next,” Allison said, noting that the militarization of the US side leaves the vulnerable waiting for weeks, easy prey to be picked off by coyotes and traffickers. “It’s like Germany y’all on *our* border,” Jason preached.

After visiting these churches, I headed west out of Austin, dazzled by an endless sunset on the flattening landscape, and dazzled more by churches with a bright future.

If you’re not delighted with the work you are doing, I thought, don’t expect anybody else to be. Each of these churches is finding traction with a message its neighbors are noticing.

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