



INSIDE:

- + Ann Leiker's Retirement
- + Closeness to God in New Places

ONE

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ONE is the official publication of the Ellis County Ministerial Alliance (ECMA) which guides its mission, content, and theme. The ECMA encourage submissions from ECMA congregations. Photographs, stories, testimonies, and other submissions should be directed toward your church leaders or sent via email to one@ourecma.com.

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Editor's Note:

Our cover story this issue is about the recent retirement of Ann Leiker, who spent 22 years as the executive director of the Center for Life Experience in Hays. Then, realizing that summer is often a time when people go on vacation, we asked our writers to describe a place that they have visited where they felt themselves growing closer to God.

On the Cover: Ann Leiker, second from left, poses with the Center for Life Experience Board and the framed poem that board members presented to her at her retirement reception May 26. Leiker has retired after 22 years as executive director of the organization. Board members are: Front row, Linn Ann Huntington, Leiker, Jolene Niernberger, Dawne Leiker, Emily Weigel and her baby son, William. Back row, Dr. Scott Robson and Alan Scheuerman. Not pictured is board member Dr. Vinod Srivastava. (Photo submitted by CFLE).

Center for Life Experience's Retiring Director 'Has Miles to Go'

Written by:

Linn Ann Huntington

When Ann Gustad Leiker announced earlier this year that she was retiring as the executive director of the Center for Life Experience (CFLE), it marked a big turning point in both her life and the life of the center.

The board of directors began a search for her replacement and expects to name the new executive director in late July. Then board members turned to another big question: How do you thank someone who has

led an organization since its founding 22 years ago?

Located at 103C E. 27th, CFLE "provides a safe space where people can process grief and life struggles in small group settings. It encourages the efforts of individuals of all backgrounds, including children, to heal themselves and support others through its non-denominational, free-of-charge programs," according to a brochure.

Leiker said that, according to her records, CFLE has served between 800 and 1,000 people per year since it

began in 2000.

Leiker moved to Hays as a teenager when her father, Dr. John Gustad, became president of FHSU in 1969. Her father handed her diploma to her when she graduated from FHSU. She had already been a social worker in Hays for 14 years and heavily involved in the Hays community when CFLE was created.

Recently, Leiker sat down with ONE to talk about CFLE's growth and the challenges it has faced—and that she has faced as its director.

Retiring Director 'Has Miles to Go' (Continued)

Founding of CFLE

CFLE was created by the First Presbyterian Church after a congregational member left a gift to the church in her will. The donor specified the gift "was to be used by the church to do one project for the community of Hays that demonstrates our Christian obligation to care for our neighbors, not the church itself," CFLE's website states. The idea was not to duplicate any other programs in the community.

The church put together a taskforce, which investigated the needs of the community, and ultimately proposed formation of the center.

At that time, Leiker had served as the administrator of what was then St. John's Long-Term Care Facility for eight years. Her background also included a stint as head of the Department of Social Work at what was then St. Anthony Hospital, where Hays Medical Center is located now.

She had also served on the board that established the Cancer Council of Ellis County and had served as the charter president for First Call for Help of Ellis County. With that background, she was selected as CFLE's executive director.

Grief support groups

While serving at the hospital, she had established Healing Hearts, a support group for "immediate family members who are healing from the death of a child in their lives." This was the first support group that she established at CFLE.

The group, which meets monthly, sponsors two public memorial events each year to honor those children. The Avenue of Pinwheels is held around Memorial Day; the Children's Holiday Memorial Tree goes up, usually in a downtown location, during December.

The second grief support group, Healing After Loss, began in 2004. It "offers mutual support for those who are healing from an adult loss in their lives, such as a spouse parent, sibling, or friend." This groups meets twice a month.

The third grief support group, Healing After Loss of Suicide (HALOS), was established in 2011. It "offers family members and friends of those who have lost a loved one to suicide a place to connect with others who are dealing with this highly specialized grief recovery process."



Ann Leiker sorts items in her office following her retirement as the long-time executive director of the Center for Life Experience. (Photo by Linn Ann Huntington)

Leiker said that to the best of her knowledge, HALOS is the only suicide survivor loss group west of Salina. It meets twice a month.

CFLE uses a "strength-based model," Leiker said. "It helps people determine what their strengths are and move forward. It empowers people to help them solve their own problems—to choose how they want to respond."

The grief support groups are open to anyone, but members must agree to abide by certain principals. One of those is strict confidentiality. Another is "we don't discuss religion or politics," Leiker said.

Retiring Director 'Has Miles to Go' (Continued)

Thorns Lecture Series

In 2004, the center began a partnership with the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI). In 2016, the center, in conjunction with NAMI, the High Plains Mental Health Center and the Kelly Center counseling service at Fort Hays State University, launched the John C. Thorns Jr. Lecture Series. It has brought suicide survivors to Hays, who have spoken to overflow audiences about their own struggles with mental illness.

The series is named in memory of the former chair of the Art Department at FHSU who was "a strong spokesperson for mental health and suicide prevention," Leiker said. Thorns was on CFLE's founding board, and he helped start HALOS.

The most recent program CFLE has created is Healing Kids' Hearts Retreat, which was begun in 2016. Each spring children who have experienced the loss of a special person in their lives gather for a day of fun activities designed to help the children heal from those losses.

Incorporates as a non-profit

In 2018, CFLE separated from the Frist Presbyterian Church and became its own incorporated 501(c)3 organization. "It has moved from being a faith-based ministry to a community not-for-profit organization," Leiker said.

Its funding now comes from foundations, businesses, local organizations, and private individuals. The organization is a United Way agency that also receives

funding from Ellis County and the City of Hays.

"We are working at expanding our support from other national groups dedicated to our mission," Leiker said.

The pandemic in 2020 created challenges for the center, as it did for everyone. The center learned to do its support group meetings via Zoom, although those groups are now meeting again face-to-face. Leiker foresees a day when people from across the United States can join the center's group meetings if no support group exists in their community.

Three things she is proudest of

In looking back over her 22 years with the center, Leiker pointed to three things she is most proud of during her tenure.

"Most important is the basic core concept that we started with—helping people understand it is OK to ask for help. You can have a safe, confidential place in a community to find resources. There are people who will listen. We can come together as a community to meet people's needs," she said.

Secondly, "CFLE has helped people to be able to talk more openly about grief,



Ann Leiker looks over the framed copy of her favorite poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost. The Board of the Center for Life Experience gave Leiker the poem at her retirement reception on May 26. (Photos by Linn Ann Huntington)

Retiring Director 'Has Miles to Go' (Continued)



Cindy Elliott and Joe Jeter wish Ann Leiker well at her retirement reception. Both were members of the founding board of the Center for Life Experience in 2000. (Photo by Linn Ann Huntington)

and loss, and death, and being able to recognize it's OK to not be OK.

"It brings people out of isolation to talk to each other. There is a place for professionals, but 'everyday people' can also help others. That's what living in community is all about, people helping people."

The third accomplishment Leiker cited was a program that FHSU and the center worked together to create. In the early 2000's, CFLE's board reached out to then-FHSU President Edward H. Hammond about establishing an opportunity for community residents to get acquainted with the growing international student population at FHSU, Leiker said.

Hammond was very receptive, and "Community Connections" was born. The international students and interested community members ate dinner together once a month. The church provided the place, FHSU's Student Affairs Office provided the transportation for students, and the center provided the food.

Leiker said that interaction and "people learning to be open to people from other cultures, with different thought processes," is something she is very proud that CFLE was a part of.

The university discontinued the "Community Connections" program during the administration of FHSU President Mirta Martin.

Leiker's plans now

While Leiker plans to travel in her retirement, she also plans to remain a Hays resident, she said, and she hopes to do volunteer work in the community.

When Leiker announced her plans to retire, the center's board wanted to come up with a gift that would be meaningful and well suited to Leiker's personality, said Board President Dawne Leiker.

That's when the board discovered that Leiker's favorite poet is Robert Frost, and her favorite poem is his "Stopping by Woods On a Snowy Evening." So the board presented her a framed copy of that poem at her retirement reception May 26.

The last of that poem reads, "But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep."

Leiker does indeed have "miles to go" in the new chapter of her life called retirement.



Linn Ann Huntington is the ECMA's editor for ONE Magazine

Black Hills Camp a 'Thin Spot' Between Heaven and Earth

Written by:

Rev. G. Chris Prater

Even before I went there the first time, it was described to me simply as a "thin spot," a place where the distance between heaven and earth was thinner than elsewhere, a place where the presence of God seems more palpable, almost heavier. It was not until I visited that I understood what others were trying to describe to me.

Nestled in the heart of the Black Hills in South Dakota, in one of the many valleys of those rolling hills, sits a place called Camp Judson, an American Baptist Churches USA camp.

The beauty of the surrounding Black Hills just adds to the sacredness of the place. The camp sits right behind South Dakota's busiest tourist attraction, Mount Rushmore. Yet, the Black Hills pine trees shield Camp Judson from the hustle and bustle of the business of this life. This place is how I envision that first garden where God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of

the day.

There are two locations in the camp that repeatedly drew me whenever I visited Camp Judson. The first was the outdoor chapel. Located on the side of one of the larger hills on the campgrounds, the chapel overlooks a small pond. A tiered stone structure, the chapel provides a near perfect acoustical setting.

As you sit on the stones looking out across the valley, you see a large cross that some previous campers dragged up the mountain and planted in a clearing to remind future worshippers of the sacrifice Jesus made for us. That cross standing on the other side of the valley is the only man-made decoration of this outdoor chapel. The surrounding nature, the creation of the God we are there to worship, serves as the only other decoration. I have never been in a more beautiful church in my life.

The second location, depending upon when you visit, can be one of the busiest spots in the camp or one of the most peaceful. I

discovered it quite by accident. On my first visit to the camp, unable to sleep, I got up early and walked around very early in the morning while most of the other campers were still asleep. I decided to walk down to the pond.

To get there, you have to cross the small creek that has been dammed up to create the pond. You may use either the vehicle bridge or the footbridge made from a railroad tie. As I was walking across the vehicle bridge, a noise stopped me in my tracks. It took me a few minutes to figure out that it was the sound of the flowing creek. I went to the footbridge so I could sit on the railroad tie and dangle my feet in the cool, flowing water in the freshness of the morning, and I experienced first-hand what my friends meant by "a thin spot."

Camp Judson as a whole, and not just the footbridge, seems to be a thin spot. Others familiar with the camp share that many locations throughout the grounds have similar significance – special

Black Hills Camp a 'Thin Spot' (Continued)

places where they go to pray, read Scripture, meditate, or simply sit and enjoy the presence of our loving heavenly Father.

It has been several years since my last visit to Camp Judson, but the memory continues to encourage and feed me spiritually. Maybe

that is what makes these special spots in our lives so significant. The memories influence us even after the passing of time. We are changed not just while we are there. The experience continues to change, mold and make us. These special places become tools used by

God to transform us into the persons that He would have us be for His service and for His glory.



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is the Pastor of
First Baptist
Church in Hays.*

Serenity, Peace Fill the Mother House of Sisters of St. Agnes

***Written by:
Cheryl Glassman***

Having been a church musician and songwriter since the age of 18, I have been blessed to attend many liturgical and music conventions. These have been located throughout the U.S. and are usually held during the summer. Twice, conferences were held in Milwaukee. The Sisters of St. Agnes, who have graced the Ellis County area with their ministry long before I was a child, have their mother house in Wisconsin. The sisters I knew in Hays always spoke so fondly of the mother house. The faith and dedication to ministry displayed by the sisters made me want to visit there.

The mother house of the Sisters of St. Agnes is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, and with a conference in Milwaukee, it seemed like a wonderful opportunity to visit. I contacted some of the sisters who had at one time ministered in Hays. Now they were retired and living at the mother house. They were so excited that my dear friend and fellow musician Paula Huser and I would be in the area.

As friends of some of the sisters who had at one time been in Hays, we were graciously given the wonderful experience of being offered room and board, and so we set up our stay and made our way to Fond du Lac. The beauty, tranquility, and uniqueness of

the mother house is hard to describe. Not only is the location serene, but the spiritual presence within the sisters living there exuded from each one of them.

Many of the sisters were retired. Other sisters cared for them and helped them with prayer and activity. One of the sisters who had been in Hays and was now residing there was Sister Clareann Schmidt. She surprised me by telling me she had found a copy of "Ave Maria" and had visited with the organist, saying she wanted me to sing it. I could not say no to sweet Sister Clareann.

I remember starting the song, and, as I often do, I closed my eyes as I sang. About halfway through the

Serenity, Peace Fill the Mother House (Continued)

first verse, I felt compelled to open my eyes. It was then that I saw almost every one of the sisters in attendance sitting in their pews with their eyes closed, listening to the music. It was such a beautiful moment, and I remember afterwards everyone sat in silence.

It was Easter season, and there was a fountain in the chapel; the sound of the water was so peaceful. It was then that I thought of Psalm 46:10, *"Be still and know that I am God."* Those words resounded in my mind, and I later wrote the lyrics to a song called "Do You Listen to the Silence." Verse 1 says, "Do you listen to the silence, as you sit here in this place; do you sense God's very presence as you look into

each face; the love of God surrounds us if only we would see --His light within each other, His love in you and me."

Paula and I had a wonderful visit and got to know other sisters. We ate meals with them and prayed with them. Evenings we spent alone in our respective rooms, praying and enjoying the tranquility. On the morning of our final day, we were at breakfast. One of the sisters stood up, went to a microphone and announced that Paula and I would be leaving. She asked that the sisters pray for us and for our safety. The sisters all raised their hands in prayer toward Paula and me. As I closed my eyes, I felt the hand of the sister next to me on my

shoulder. As the sisters prayed, an overwhelming joy and peace I cannot put into words filled me, and I felt tears on my face.

We cannot all stay with the sisters at a convent, and not everyone has the wonderful opportunity to share time with them. We do, however, have the opportunity every single day to find moments of time in our lives to "listen to the silence," asking God to hear our prayers and remembering the words of Psalm 46: *"Be still and know that I am God."*



Cheryl Glassman is the Minister of Music at St. Nicolas of Myra Catholic Church in Hays.

Making a Painful, Wonderful Discovery in Japan

Written by:
Brandon Nimz

A few years ago, I traveled to Japan to spend five weeks training as a live-in student in the martial art of Aikido. This was a very intense training time. On long days we got up before 5 a.m. to start a cycle of arriving at one of several dojo (martial arts training

halls) nearby to clean the dojo one hour before class, practice for a one-hour class, serve tea, clean, and then move on to the next place to repeat the process.

The long days had six classes, so we tended to get to bed around midnight before repeating the cycle the next day. On shorter days we

would have only a few classes and could even sometimes rest or travel nearby. We also had certain holidays when we'd travel into the mountains or to nearby parks or universities to demonstrate, train, or simply rest and celebrate.

Though this trip was partly for intensive training in

Making a Painful, Wonderful Discovery in Japan (Continued)

Aikido, I was personally using the trip as a reflection time and a time to spiritually retreat with God in both my downtime and my active time. I didn't initially realize how truly little downtime I would have, but trying to connect with God when I don't perceive that I have time to do so is probably one of the most important disciplines for me as those tend to be the times that I really, truly do need to connect with Him.

Though there were many important moments in my spiritual journey on this trip, one that sticks out occurred late at night as I left Kodaira dojo. At some point prior in the trip, the hard physical activity, extremely low amount of sleep, and requirement to sit on my knees in a position known as seiza for up to a couple hours a day had caused me to injure my knee.

It was quite painful, and my knee didn't move correctly (I later found out I had a minor tear in my meniscus and MCL). At this point in the trip, I didn't know what was wrong—only that it hurt to move it. It was around 11:30 p.m., and we had finished cleaning. I had to hurry to make the 20-30 minute walk to the subway station to return to the dojo the men slept in, and I didn't

have much time to make it before the subway stopped running. If I didn't make it, I would have many miles and hours of limping ahead.

It was almost snowing out, but it was just warm enough that it was raining instead. The heavy rain penetrated some of the seams in my umbrella and dripped ice water on my head. Tired, cold, and in quite a bit of pain, I started limping off to the subway.

As I was walking in the rain, I prayed, and while praying I realized that there were two truths that were mutually occurring in my head. Denying either was lying to myself.

On one side I was uncertain if I had permanently messed up my leg. I was a long way from home with no return until my scheduled ticket. I couldn't afford more help here and possibly couldn't afford it back home. It was cold, rainy, and I would get at most four to five hours of sleep that night on a half-inch mat on a hardwood floor, with a very hard physical day tomorrow, and I hurt.

On the other side, I was in the middle of Japan, passing a small shrine at the moment that had survived WWII and was probably hundreds of years old if not older, and the

rain was beautiful, and no one else was walking on this street at this late hour.

I was enjoying a picturesque landscape in peace and could almost feel God in the beauty of the wind, rain, and experiences around me. I was on an adventure that many would dearly love to be on. This was a tough moment, because I realized that denying one truth to “be happy” wasn't honest and wouldn't create happiness.

I also found a place in myself where I could acknowledge the pain and discomfort that was true, while still choosing primarily to “live” in the equal truth of the beauty of the experience and God's presence. This place in myself was a very important place to discover, as it is one I can still use to this day in tough circumstances to gain perspective. That said, it's a very hard place to find since it only works as long as I'm willing to be completely honest and to enter it with God.



Brandon Nimz is the Director of Unite Ministry in Hays.