

is looking forward to hearing the South in our voices and to seeing vegetables and cornbread on the table.

Sept. 18 - Lay led service, UU principle six

Sept. 25 - Nan Johnson, topic "Theology of non-violence"

TUPELO GROUP: Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Tupelo meets every 1st and 3rd Sunday at 11a.m. at Temple B'Nai Israel 1301 Marshall St. Tupelo. We would love to have you come over. Check out our website, <http://www.UUTupelo.org>

>>>> RELIGIOUS EDUCATION <<<<

Back-to-School Bonfire for RE Families!

Saturday, August 20

6:30 p.m.

UU Hall

Schedule:

6:30 Arrival, kisses and hugs

6:45 Elaine will lead a fun game for the full group which will help us think about what we want to repeat and what we want to change this year

7:15 Divide into 3 groups (Sunday School, Middle School, High School) for discussion and planning

8:00 Light the fire!

8:15 S'mores and/or songs and/or stories and/or conversation and/or meditation and/or...

>>>> NEW MEMBER SPOTLIGHT <<<<

David and Judy Smith moved to Mississippi from Lee's Summit, MO (Kansas City) in November, 2004 to begin their retirement. They live in western Lafayette County near Sardis Lake.

They are both ordained Unity ministers and have served in various ministerial capacities since 1990. They served churches in Minnesota and California, and both served in management positions at Silent Unity, Unity's worldwide prayer ministry at Unity World Headquarters, Unity Village, MO. David has also served as a spiritual counselor and group leader in the mental health field.

Since moving to Mississippi, Judy has started a

business as an artist specializing in pet portraits. David works part-time as a courier for the Federal Reserve Bank of Memphis. He also is a volunteer chaplain for Baptist Hospice in Oxford.

Besides painting, Judy hobbies include gardening and all types of artistic work. David loves motorcycle riding but has given that up (at least for now) since moving from Kansas City.

They were drawn to UUCO because of its mission statement of openness, tolerance, diversity, and the commitment to spiritual growth and social justice. They first attended UUCO in January, 2005 and have been regulars ever since.

Judy and David have two daughters and three grandchildren, living in the St. Louis and Kansas City areas.

>>>> MIDSOUTH DISTRICT <<<<<<<<

"Living Simply, Living Spiritually, Living Sustainably"

Is Healthy Congregation Conference Theme

OCTOBER 8, 2005, a Saturday, in Auburn, AL, is the time for the 2005 Mid-South HEALTHY CONGREGATION CONFERENCE.

This is THE place for training and networking for a congregation's current and emerging leaders! A team of half a dozen folks from each congregation should plan to attend this annual Mid-South event!

"Living Simply, Living Spiritually, Living Sustainably", Mid-South's "green theme" for the year will inspire the conference, and a featured track will focus on what it means to be a Green Sanctuary and how congregations can live out this theme. Dr. Sharon Roberts, Trustee for Justice on the Mid-South Board, will lead the track.

As usual, other tracks will be offered for congregation leaders, this year with some very 'green' tinges!

- Leadership
- Stewardship
- Ministry and Worship

- Membership and Communications
- Religious Education
- Youth

UUSC Environmental Justice Leader, Deepa Joshi, will headline the conference and will speak during the Ingathering and participate in several of the tracks.

The conference is designed to be an accessible one-day event, beginning at 9am and finishing by 4pm. More details and registration information will very soon be up on the Mid-South website.

For more immediate information, contact the Mid-South Office.

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Services from your Mid-South District Office and Staff are possible only because congregations in our district make fair share contributions to the UUA Annual Program Fund and Mid-South District. Thank you for your generosity!

>>>>>> **THE CONGO** <<<<<<<<
AFRICA WILL CHANGE YOU
By J. Adrian Aumen

They say a trip to Africa will change you. While the facial scars are healing, the marks left on my heart and mind are deeper and more difficult to define.

Our recent "Adventure in the Congo" had barely begun when the first hard lesson about heroism in Africa hit me -- in the literal form of a fencepost - - right between the eyes.

Dashing across unfamiliar territory in hopes of making a valiant save, I tripped over some invisible barrier that sent me crashing to my knees and smashing face-first into the fence surrounding the court where students of The American School of Kinshasa usually play floor hockey without half so much bloodshed.

Sporting a gash in my forehead that went to the skull and another in my lip, only millimeters shy of an inelegant piercing, I wound up at the Centre Medical de Kinshasa, just yards from the mighty Congo River, blinking up at baked beetles in the light fixtures while an amused nurse gently applied suturing tape to my wounded pride.

I'd intended to deliver relief to Africa, but already Africa was relieving me.

Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, is breathtaking in many ways -- from the richness of its natural resources to the poverty of its people; the boldness of its colors to the ambiguity of its form; the enormity of its jungles, savannahs and flowing waterways to the enormity of its history, isolation and social decline. A bounty of potential amid scarcity and want.

It is an uneasy place on the planet. It is an uneasy place to visit.

My purpose in going to Congo was both personal and humanitarian. Accompanying my dear friend Phil Kliewer to his childhood home gave me the opportunity to see a portion of that storied region and to make some direct contribution to its well-being.

My initial expectations were probably typically American -- a smattering of National Geographic photos: vast wildlands teeming with exotic animals; bucolic villages nestled in deep, dark jungles; delightful displays of human creativity and native spirit.

But before leaving Oxford, my expectations changed. TV images of starving children mixed with impressions of war, genocide, corruption, environmental destruction and AIDS. The four large suitcases we'd packed to bulging with donated school supplies, children's shoes, eye-glasses and medical gear no longer seemed like splendid treasure chests but more like tragic tokens of vain idealism. Tiny droplets of the proverbial Spit Into The Wind.

As it turned out, our journeys were restricted to Western Congo, mercifully far from the war, famine, refugee camps and forced labor occurring in the East. Our experiences were certainly less heart-wrenching than I'd feared but maybe as mind-boggling.

Entering DRC's capital, Kinshasa, felt like dropping onto the set of a Mad Max film. Obviously, a nuclear bomb had gone off, but all the people survived - and multiplied!

Nothing looks new in Kinshasa. Most major buildings are in terrible disrepair - at least those visible from the street. Squatters cook, hang laundry and burn trash outside their "homes" in partially completed -- or partially destroyed - forsaken structures. Whatever remains of the city's wealth is hidden behind tall concrete walls, often topped with broken glass or razor wire.

Kinshasa's 7 million residents all seem to live, work and socialize along one 2- to 8-lane road (depending on your driving skills or courage). This major artery is closely bounded on both sides by urban entrepreneurs, hawking everything from fruits and vegetables to tires, mattresses, dressmaking fabric and cellular phones. All day long, men, women and children walk the dusty roadside, balancing impossible loads on their heads: eggs stacked in 6-layer pyramids; gunnysacks stuffed with peanuts or manioc greens; metal tubs filled with rocks, machine parts, drying fish....

Amid the constant throng of people and beat-up, overloaded, smoke-spewing vehicles, appear impeccably dressed women in dazzlingly colorful *pagnes* (ankle-length wrap skirts, often with matching tops and scarves) and sharp-dressed men in pressed slacks, shirts and ties, who walk miles each day, looking for jobs in this country of 90 percent unemployment.

A collage of ironies, Congo would be a photojournalist's delight if picture-taking weren't forbidden in so many areas. With machine-gun wielding soldiers on practically every city corner,

not only are the shutterbugs kept in check but there's little civil disturbance amid what otherwise seems like chaos. A good sense of humor and timing definitely goes a long way in a place filled with so much uncertainty -- especially if you don't speak French or one of the local tongues.

Nonetheless, after two weeks of photographing only willing humans, flowers and landscapes, the urge to secretly snap a few city scenes was irresistible. And, of course, those last few photos would get us into trouble with a nosy guard at the airport. Had it been our first run-in with Congolese authorities, we might have just handed over the camera, but by the time we left the country -- only days before political riots saw several people injured or killed, including one dead in Kinshasa -- we were veterans of extortion, bribery, roadblock-busting and even a bumpy police chase through an Angolan border town.

Outside the hectic cities, life is naturally more quiet and evenly paced. Some 15 miles from downtown Kinshasa, men, women and children have been steadily building a community of nearly 100 homes through Habitat for Humanity. Working alongside the homeowners-to-be -- digging foundations and carrying water up from the polluted river -- even playing games with their children -- afforded some time to think about what it must be like to live in one of the two-room, concrete block houses, without running water or electricity.

In more remote communities, accessible only by footpath or small plane, conditions are much the same -- only different. Families of two to 10 people live in one- or two-room huts made of sticks, dried mud and thatched palm fronds. The rolling red clay soil, so reminiscent of North Mississippi's terrain, is covered in places by heavy vines that closely resemble kudzu but are called by an aptly longer and nearly unpronounceable name.

Country people are generally friendly, and the curious children, who've rarely seen white people, frequently stare or giggle to each other, "Mundeli!"

Especially inspiring is the village of Kikongo on the Wamba River, where "The Poisonwood Bible" author Barbara Kingsolver spent about a year of her childhood. Our hosts there, 3rd- and 4th-generation missionaries, have helped the indigenous Congolese build an amazing community complex, including a hospital, schools and a sawmill. As everywhere in Congo, aspects of primitive and modern worlds intertwine, provoking a fascinating sense of time-warp.

A wonderfully surreal scene occurs each Friday night on Kikongo's modest soccer field. Just before dusk, the local children stretch a wide sheet between two wooden posts at one end of the field. Night falls quickly at the equator, and soon the field is dark but full of life. Hundreds of people of all ages have walked from miles around on narrow paths, carrying the small chairs on which they now sit and quietly wait in the pitch blackness at the edge of the jungle.

Several minutes later, mission staff wheel out an electric generator attached to a film projector. The children's sheet is then transformed into an outdoor movie screen, featuring health videos on topics ranging from prenatal care to malaria and STD prevention. The short films are followed by an aging Disney movie or other G-rated Hollywood show, sometimes with a bonus music video between. (On this night, Michael Jackson's 1991 MTV hit "Black or White" seems a particularly uncanny segue into a never-so-captivating "The Parent Trap"!)

The children twitter excitedly as the main attraction begins. One of the missionaries breaks in periodically to give plot updates in Kituba, a regional trade language. If the moral of the story is good enough, it's likely to come up again in Sunday's sermon, delivered by one of the Congolese pastors. Three hours later, the movie-

goers slip silently into the night under "God's Clock," a.k.a. the Milky Way.

Along with the "Four Rs" (Reading, Writing, Arithmetic & Religion), the missionaries at Kikongo also teach environmental stewardship, working with local chiefs and villagers to restore dwindling wildlife and better manage their crops and natural resources. They gave us a fascinating eco-tour that ended at a gorgeous falls which local villagers consider sacred. As we neared the falls, the sound of metal drums rang out as the chief and village elder welcomed us to their sylvan retreat. They generously presented us with two stalks of juicy sugar cane, and, in return, we gave them a soccer ball printed with the Ten Commandments of Health for the youngsters in their community.

Getting to and from the falls meant crossing the river on the only motorized boat in the village, and walking more than a mile each way through bush and tall grass plains where a pair of lions had been seen the previous week. The return of these predators indicated the ecosystem's health was improving, but, for the villagers, the big cats' appearance mostly reinforced their belief that their chief has two mice that turn into lions at his command. (I'm told a similar myth exists in Vanga, a fast-growing town on the Kwilu River, where Phil was born. People there say an elderly missionary doctor turns into a hippopotamus at night. It's their way of deifying people who have earned respect through great deeds.)

I suppose it was there, in that remote piece of jungle called Kikongo, that part of my escaped idealism finally returned. The boxes of pencils, rulers and colored chalk kindly given by my friends in Oxford, along with the medical gloves, masks and stethoscopes donated by a North Mississippi hospital, were so graciously accepted and would fill so many essential needs.

Urban strife notwithstanding, Congo is a place of tremendous beauty, spontaneous joys and profound goodness. If we'd been insulated from all the uncertainties, capricious bureaucracy,

poverty and grime that are commonplace, we might not have appreciated so much the abundance of brave, caring individuals, the innovative strengths and the natural wonders we encountered.

For every degree my optimism had waned, others were holding fast to their ideals -- the Habitat for Humanity director who provides leadership and example; the university administrators who share their visions for progress; the missionaries at Kikongo; and the many other American and

European ex-pats who live and work throughout Africa in various agencies and NGOs, providing education, health care, encouragement and hope.

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Phil and I hope to have a chance to show images from our Adventure in the Congo during a UU gathering this fall. Meanwhile, this article and some photos are online at <http://home.olemiss.edu/~adriana/congo/africandelta.htm>; additional photos at <http://www.aliensaround.blogspot.com>.