

# Shared Life

The Monthly Newsletter of Old First Presbyterian Church

June 2012

Church Website: [www.oldfirst.org](http://www.oldfirst.org)

Church Photostream: [www.flickr.com/photos/oldfirst](http://www.flickr.com/photos/oldfirst)

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## **The Brain on Faith**

*This is an excerpt of a multi-part interview of Saskia deVries by Kristina Robb-Dover. The complete interview can be found at Fellowship of Saints and Sinners at [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com). -Editor*

### **Are human beings hard-wired to believe in something, God, etc.?**

This is a great question. Daniel Dennett, among others, has argued for this idea. He wouldn't say "hard-wired" – per se. That has much stronger meaning in science than I think you mean. But do we have an innate tendency to believe in something, such as God? I'd say, yes. A big part of what our brains do is to create coherent sense out of all the information we receive. For example, take visual perception – our brain creates a whole, stable and consistent percept from the snippets of visual information we take in each moment. As we live in the world, our brain is constantly making sense of our experiences and the information we receive, creating essentially a narrative of the world. And this is extremely valuable and important, and allows us to function in the world.

One theory of religion is that it results from this tendency. Essentially, in creating this narrative, in making sense of what we perceive, our brains are looking for causes, for agency. Bustling in the leaves behind you is because a person or animal is there, etc. So the idea is that when we can't find a proximate cause we devise spirits or gods that cause the unexplained things. The theory is that over time this developed into religion as we know it today, with dogma and doctrine and rituals. And so long as religion is a list of just-so stories about the world, and a god (or gods) that look a lot like super heroes, then yeah, I think this could be a fair assessment of religion. But I don't think that's what faith is, what religion is – and that's why I think we need to be willing and able to let go of just-so stories and the idols we create for God.

So yes, I think we have an innate tendency to believe things. We need this in order to function in the world – to navigate, to communicate, to glean any information from the world around us. And some aspects of religion rely on this innate function, but it's not the whole story.

### **Some people would say faith is just a neurological circuit in the brain firing. How would you respond to that?**

Why "just"? There's a notion that if something is the result of brain activity then it isn't real. If I explain to you how we perceive sunsets, and how the neural wiring of the visual system establishes complementary colors, does that make the sunset less beautiful? The activity of our brain is what lets us think, lets us see beautiful things, taste food, listen to music, laugh at jokes, and fall in love with people. It doesn't make these things less real or pleasing – in fact, I find that understanding more about these things makes me enjoy them more. For example, there are neural circuits in our brains that underlie language, our ability to speak, our ability to learn language, etc. But nobody would suggest that language is just an illusion, just the activity of neural circuits. Rather, evidence of such neural circuits validates these functions. Similarly, the idea that faith is the result of neural activity should not diminish or invalidate faith. The fact that faith amounts to brain activity doesn't make it less real or significant. All of our behavior and all of our thoughts and all of our feelings result from neural activity – why would faith be any different?

## SUMMER SERMONS

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Maggi's sabbatical this summer gives Old First the opportunity for a virtual festival of preaching, as we will welcome some of our presbytery's best preachers as worship leaders, as well as gain a broader understanding of some of our own members' gifts. In general, expect to hear from three clergy and one elder each month. (Of course our members will continue to provide other worship leadership as liturgists and leaders of the prayers of the people.)

The Reverend **Susan Ashton**, D.Min. will preach and celebrate communion on **June 3**. Susan is a member of the Presbytery of San Francisco and a long-time friend of Old First Presbyterian Church, where she was a parish associate in the 1990s. She was Covenant Network's second employee, serving from 1999 to 2002. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary (now Union Presbyterian Seminary) in Richmond, Virginia (the same one Maggi attended), Susan recently completed service as pastor at Ocean Avenue Presbyterian here in the City. She will help our deacons and elders provide pastoral care during Maggi's absence.

Elder **Stephen Taber**, J.D. will preach on Sunday, **June 10**. He has been a member of Old First Presbyterian Church for many years and has served on session several. He is a lawyer and uses his legal knowledge on behalf of Old First Presbyterian Church and of many non-profits. He is also legal counsel for both the Presbytery of San Francisco and the Presbytery of Sacramento. Steve and his wife Sarah generously host many Old First Presbyterian Church gatherings, from educational forums to holiday open houses. A graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary, he is the author of the prize-winning history *Pioneer Community of Faith: Old First Presbyterian Church 1849-1999*.

The Reverend **Erwin C. Barron**, Ph.D. will preach and celebrate communion on **June 17**. Though Erwin only recently became a member of the Presbytery of San Francisco and was named our parish associate, he has been part of our community for sixteen years. Erwin teaches literature at City College and ethics at the Graduate Theological Union. At various times he has served Old First Presbyterian Church as director of Christian education and briefly, along with Susan, as interim pastor. During Maggi's absence, Erwin will moderate session meetings.

The Reverend **Megan Rohrer**, director of the Welcome Ministry, will preach on **June 24**. During her ten years at Welcome she has transformed it from a ministry to the homeless into a community serving neighbors on the margins of society and has succeeded in getting all of our regular sidewalk neighbors "inside" – that is, housed. Megan is a nationally recognized expert on issues involving street people and especially LGBT youth. She is the author of *Queerly Lutheran*.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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### **Welcome Fundraiser June 2.**

There will be a dinner (similar to the Saturday Community Dinners) held in the Fellowship Hall at 6:00 p.m., June 2, as a fundraiser for Welcome to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reverend Megan Rohrer's role as executive director of Welcome. Tickets are available at [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com) or by contacting Welcome: [megan@welcomeministry.org](mailto:megan@welcomeministry.org).

### **Beyond the Myth: Emily Dickinson's Vision, June 3 and 17**

Whether it is her conflicted faith, her mysterious self-chosen isolation, or what she wore, Emily Dickinson has continually intrigued our imagination. But perhaps none of her poetry has been as provocative as her "religious poems." A two-part summer reading group will discuss selected poems that reflect Emily's deeply personal struggle with the prevailing religious beliefs of her time. The first session will look at poems that reveal her searching for God, and the second session will look at poems that focus on Jesus. Diane Molberg leads sessions at 9:30 am on Sunday, June 3 and June 17 in the Munro Room.

Copies of the poems to be discussed will be sent to members already on the book group class list, or by contacting Diane at molberg@earthlink.net, or when you see her in church. Copies will also be available in the church office. Recommended text: *Final Harvest* or *The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*.

### **San Francisco Night Ministry Open House, June 3**

The volunteers and staff of the  
**San Francisco Night Ministry**  
invite you to the:  
**Annual Night Ministry Open House**  
Sunday, June 3 from 2 to 4 pm,  
St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 1111 O'Farrell between Gough and Franklin Streets.  
Come to hear about Night Ministry's 47 years of service to those in crisis or distress in the middle of the night. Learn about volunteer and service opportunities, simply come to support and celebrate those who serve faithfully as the Church's Night Shift. There will be light refreshments and music.  
For More information: email office@sfnightministry.org

### **Interfaith Food Pantry Registration, June 9**

The Saturday morning Food Pantry hosted at Old First is changing to a new timed entry system in June to keep from turning clients away empty-handed. We will need four to six volunteers on June 9 to help register clients for the timed entry system. We will also need four to six volunteers on June 16 to help run the first timed-entry distribution along with all the other churches that support the pantry. We will need 18-20 volunteers to help run the Old First Food Pantry on June 23. Later Food Pantry volunteer opportunities this summer include July 28 (18-20 helpers needed) and August 25 (All Faiths' day, need four to six helpers). Contact Joy Crosser to sign up and learn more details: foodpantry@oldfirst.org.

During the month of June, please bring peanut butter to contribute to the S.F. Food Bank. There is a barrel in the narthex for non-perishable food contributions. Plastic jars only, no glass please.

### **Help Celebrate Pastor Megan Rohrer's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with Welcome, "Sock Sunday," June 24**

At the worship service on June 24, Megan will be preaching and bringing us up to date on the current activities of Welcome. To honor her and her work with many, many homeless and poverty-stricken people over the past decade, Old First Presbyterian Church is having a sock drive on "Sock Sunday." Bring packages of white socks to church on Sunday, June 24 to celebrate and support Welcome's work.

### **AIDS Walk, Sunday, July 15**

Old First members and friends can join with other Bay Area Presbyterians on Team #1057 – "Presbyterians Fighting AIDS" for the annual AIDS Walk. The 10 km (6.2 mile) Walk takes place in Golden Gate Park starting and ending at Sharon Meadow. Check out the registration and donation information at <http://www.aidswalk.net/sanfran/>. There will also be sign-up and sponsor information at coffee hours until then. This is the schedule: 9 am: Sign-In and Awards Open, 9:45 am: Opening Ceremony: 10:30 am. AIDS Walk Begins: 12:30 pm. Post-Walk Concert: 2:30 pm. Results thereafter.

### **All Church Retreat, September 28-30**

Save the dates for Old First Presbyterian Church's all church retreat coming up this September 28-30 at the Mount Hermon retreat center.

### **GOOD FRIDAY OFFERING**

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Our Good Friday offering generated \$136 for the PC(USA)'s Syria Disaster Relief efforts and \$136 for the Pilgrims of Ibillin, an agency supporting projects cultivating a just peace in Israel/Palestine.

## **PASTOR HENDERSON'S SABBATICAL**

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One part of Pastor Maggi's "terms of call" is the provision for a sabbatical after a number of years of service. She will begin this sabbatical on the day after Pentecost, Monday, May 28, and will return for the church retreat, September 28-30.

In preparation for her sabbatical the session has formed a *Sabbatical Group* to ensure that all eventualities are covered. The Worship Committee has the big task of arranging for ministers to preach and to administer communion; this presents us with the exciting opportunity of asking various people, including our own church members to preach. Elders and Deacons, along with the Reverend Erwin Barron and the Reverend Susan Ashton, will take the pastoral role with home and hospital visits. Volunteers will help Brad Peterson in the office with day-to-day tasks. If you would like to help, have questions, or have suggestions, please contact any member of the Sabbatical Group: George Becker, Christopher Burt, Pam Byers, Saskia de Vries, Jeanne Kirkwood and Mary Russell. Also, please remember Maggi in prayer while she's on her sabbatical. Pray that it may

be a time of retreat, renewal, rest and revitalization.



**Pictured: Susan Ashton, Maggi Henderson, Erwin Barron after worship on Pentecost, May 27**

## **Logan Hollarsmith Bikes across the U.S. from East to West**

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Old First Presbyterian Church member, Logan Hollarsmith, a sophomore at Bard College in New York, will embark on a cross-country bicycle ride in the first part of June. He recently finished building the bike he plans to ride. Logan has worked at the bicycle coop in San Francisco and is one of the leaders of the bike coalition at Bard. He has also started a rickshaw service to shuttle students around Bard's vast campus in the Hudson Valley, negotiating with China for the purchase of a rickshaw. For the cross-country trip, Logan has received a grant from Bard College to interview people along the way. The interview will then air on broadcast and internet radio stations he has contacted.

Two recent Bard College graduates will join him on this 70-miles-a-day-for-70-days adventure. Fortunately, these alumnae completed this same ride a few summers ago and they know the route from Manhattan to Seattle along the Canadian well.

## **Teens Cycling Across the Wild West stop at Old First Presbyterian Church, June 19-20**

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*deCycles*, a Christian cross-denominational cycling program, has 60 teens who will start their bicycle trip of over 2,100 miles from San Francisco to Bloomington, Indiana, after overnighing at Old First Presbyterian. Starting from the Pacific Ocean on June 20, *deCycles* will visit multiple sites of natural grandeur along the way as they ride over the western mountain ranges including the Rockies and the plateaus and plains that lie to the east of them. These teens are living examples of how Spirit moves in individuals' lives to accomplish what most would think is impossible – 2,100 miles on bicycle in 3½ weeks. But the impossible happens every day and every mile of the way on this *deCycles* trip. The Christian principles of kindness, commitment and faith are the foundation for the strength each rider must possess to get down the road. These riders are truly modern day miracles!

## **YOUR PLEDGE DOLLARS AT WORK**

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The Sojourn Chaplaincy at S.F. General Hospital has offered a multi-faith ministry of invitational presence there since 1982. The chaplains offer compassion and understanding to patients, their loved ones, as well as hospital staff. Their non-judgmental, listening presence provides the support that is often needed during times of illness and stress. While the hospital staff provides services for the physical, mental and emotional health of patients, sojourn chaplains provide spiritual support. Chaplains are volunteers from the community and are given excellent training by Sojourn staff to develop listening, caring skills and to provide a helpful presence for those in need. They think of themselves as companions on the journey. Central to Sojourn is the belief that each person is remarkable and unique, and deserving of understanding. Members of Old First Presbyterian Church have served as chaplains at Sojourn.

## **STEWARDSHIP EVERY MEMBER VISITATION REPORT**

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Our Stewardship Campaign was very successful this year. In this second year of a three- year stewardship cycle we are focusing on communicating and building connections within our congregation through our Every Member Visitation Program. In this modern world of instant communication, in our relentless pursuit of independence, it is easy to forget that just "getting together" with each other is one of the most powerful community-building tools we have. In teams of two, comprised mostly of elders and deacons, we were successfully able to visit over 90% of the congregation.

These every member visits yielded many valuable insights. Members and friends of Old First Presbyterian Church are dedicated to this beloved community; they provided many thoughtful and creative ideas for strengthening and improving our mission and presence. The committee is extremely grateful for the hours of preparation and reporting provided by our visitors and for the gracious reception they received from all those visited.

One aim of our visits was to ascertain not only what programs and events are of particular interest and value to members and friends, but also to encourage the congregation to consider where we are willing to put our time and efforts. As Pastor Henderson told us at the beginning of this project, ideas abound but nothing happens without a commitment of time, energy and resources.

The most frequently raised issues in our visits were narrowed down to ten categories for discussion at a coffee hour presentation in the Fellowship Hall on Sunday, March 25. Many of you joined this conversation and we further reduced the categories to four: social gatherings, Christian education, the Future of Old First Presbyterian Church, and worship and music.

Over the next few months we will be highlighting some of these ideas in an on-going column for *Shared Life*. We look forward to your continued insights. –Mary Russell and Michael Berg

PS: A practical matter: Some members and friends have indicated that they are not receiving *Shared Life* either in print or digital format. We are cross-checking our membership list and the mailing list, but if you know of someone who is not receiving *Shared Life*, please let Brad Peterson in the church office know so he can update our mailing list. –MR and MB

## **Session CROP Walk Thank-You: There Is Enough For All**

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Great thanks go to all who contributed to this year's CROP Walk. Diane Lewis and Mary Russell raised \$670.00. CROP Hunger Walks help children and families worldwide – and right here in the U.S. – to have food for today, while building for a better tomorrow. Local efforts make a huge difference. Founded in 1946, Church World Service is a cooperative ministry of 37 Christian communions working together to eradicate hunger and poverty and promote peace and justice among the world's most vulnerable people.

## CONGRATULATIONS!

Old First Presbyterian Church extends congratulations to two of our members: **Chloe Pollock**, who completed San Francisco Public Schools' Community Activities Training on May 17, and her brother, **Spencer Pollock**, who will graduate with a degree in psychology from UC Santa Cruz at commencement exercises on June 17.

## REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY: THE SUNDAYS IN JUNE, 2012

Date	Day	1 <sup>st</sup> Reading	Psalm	2 <sup>nd</sup> Reading	Gospel Reading
June 03	Trinity	Isaiah 6:1-8	Psalm 29	Romans 8:12-17	John 3:1-17
June 10	Ordinary 10	1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)	Psalm 138	2 Cor 4:13-5:1	Mark 3:20-35
June 17	Ordinary 11	1 Samuel 15:34-16:13	Psalm 20	2 Cor 5:6-10, (11-13) 14-17	Mark 4:26-34
June 24	Ordinary 12	1 Samuel (1a, 4-11, 19-23) 32-49 or 1 Samuel 17:57-18:5, 10-16	Psalm 9:9-20 or Psalm 133	2 Cor 6:1-13	Mark 4:35-41

## OTHER DATES TO NOTE

Saturday	Jun 02	Welcome Fundraiser, Fellowship Hall 6:00 p.m.
Sunday	Jun 03	Name Tag Sunday, Adult Ed: Emily and God, 9:30 a.m., Munro Room
Saturday	Jun 09	Interfaith Food Pantry Registration, 9:00 a.m.
Saturday	Jun 09	Welcome: Community Dinner, 5:30 pm
Sunday	Jun 10	Deacons' Meeting, 12:30 pm
Sunday	Jun 10	Deadline for Next Month's Issue of Shared Life
Sunday	Jun 17	Adult Ed: Emily and Jesus, Religious Poems of Emily Dickinson 9:30 a.m., Munro Room
Saturday	Jun 23	Old First Staffs the Interfaith Food Pantry
Saturday	Jun 23	Welcome: Community Dinner, 5:30 pm
Tuesday	Jun 26	Session Meeting, 7:00 p.m., Munro Room

## The Officers of Old First Presbyterian Church

**Session** George Becker, personnel; Michael Berg, mission and giving; Chris Burt, worship; Pam Byers, community-building; Barry Clagett, finance, Saskia de Vries, worship; Bill Feister, Christian education; Gregory Free, finance; Jeanne Kirkwood, clerk of session; Mary Russell, mission and giving; Randy Smith; Steve Taber, operations; Betty Voris, community-building

**Board of Deacons** Nina Berg, communion clean up, flowers/memorial donations; Carol Carter, funding requests, communion cleanup; Samuel Cheng, Tracy Clagett, secretary; Dan Joraanstad, co-moderator; Craig Kehne, coffee hour, communion clean-up; Diane Lewis, funding requests, cards; Harriet MacLean, memorial receptions and meals; Dana Nojima, co-moderator, merchandise sales; Leota Parker, Glen Potter, transportation; AnnieScott Rogers, deacons' prayer chain; Oliver Spencer, funding requests, special events; Sarah Taber, memorial Receptions and Meals; Horngsheng Tu, Technology