

Chet Guinn

Peacemaker – Pastor – Protestor – Preserver



Chet and MFSA friends at the Shattering Silence sculpture after a Hiroshima observance August 6, 2012



Below: awards and photographs that grace the walls of Fire Station #4



Chet was born in Whitestown, Indiana on July 19, 1928, the youngest of three children born to Beryl and Bill Guinn. When Chet was two, the Great Depression hit hard, and his father faced a choice of moving to a job in Sioux City or facing unemployment. He chose the move, and thus Chet and sisters Gwen and Virginia spent their growing up years in Sioux City accumulating vivid memories of the Great Depression. For Thanksgiving they ate hot dogs instead of turkey.

When Chet reached adolescence they moved from the heart of Sioux City to nearby McCook Lake, South Dakota. Chet loved the opportunity for swimming, boating, ice skating, and generally enjoying being close to nature.

During Chet's high school years, he witnessed an incident that aroused a concern about racism in our country that has continued throughout his life. The famous contralto, Marian Anderson, was scheduled for a concert in Sioux City, but none of the hotels would accommodate her. He knew this was very wrong and spoke out against it. Morningside College President Earl Roadman and wife Irma invited Marian to stay in their home; that was the beginning of Chet's warm friendship with the Roadmans. Chet spoke on racism at the annual interdenominational Sunrise Easter Service in Grandview Park that year.

With no Presbyterian Church near McCook Lake, Chet's family joined Riverside Methodist Church where the pastor, Kenneth Whitney, influenced and encouraged Chet's interest in scripture to the point of hiring Chet with the title Associate Pastor while still in high school.

When Chet heard that the Riverside Church was struggling to pay a building debt owed since Depression Days, he contacted the popular gospel singing Blackwood Brothers quartet in Shenandoah for information on how to schedule a concert. And it happened — Chet's first fundraiser. With much help from the Methodist Youth Fellowship, the sanctuary was filled to overflowing with paid customers!

Chet graduated from high school in 1946 and enrolled in Morningside College (now University). In his sophomore year he was appointed pastor of Trimble Methodist Church in Sioux City where he was instrumental in raising funds for a much-needed new building. It was a special honor when President Earl Roadman dug the first spade of soil at the groundbreaking ceremony.

Please recall that World War II and the polio epidemic were heavy on the hearts of people during this time, making fundraising an even greater than usual challenge.

After graduating from Morningside, Chet enrolled in Garrett Theological Seminary and soon was appointed student pastor for Hazelton/Stanley Methodist Churches. He commuted to Iowa at *no cost* on the Great Western Gandy Dancer car — an old passenger coach attached to a freight train that transported alcoholics hanging out on Chicago's Madison Avenue looking for jobs on the railroad. While a student pastor he raised funds to build a new parsonage, replacing a large deteriorating Victorian house. Chet had yet to be introduced to the fun of restoring old buildings.

Chet's seminary studies were interrupted at the start of his last academic year by an urgent notification that he was afflicted with advanced tuberculosis discovered by a mobile X-ray machine stationed in front of the Oelwein theater. As a result, he spent 13 months at Oakdale Sanatorium in Iowa City. At that time there was little that could be done to treat TB other than bed rest and/or surgically "caving" in the rib cage to discourage spread of the disease. U.S. medical science had not yet found a way to surgically remove damaged lung portions. In the fourth month of bed rest in Oakdale, he was informed that a European surgeon, Dr. Erinhoff, claimed the ability to remove lung portions and had offered to demonstrate his method at Iowa University School of Medicine. Volunteers for surgery were needed. Chet volunteered. His surgery was 100% successful. He was discharged from the sanatorium with a clean bill of health eight months later.

During those eight months, Juanita Yearous, a vocal music teacher, visited Chet regularly and their relationship grew. Just a month before he was to be released, he was given a week's leave to be married and take a brief honeymoon in Chicago. Following Chet's final month in Oakdale, they moved into the new parsonage waiting for them in Hazleton.

Having been forced to miss the last year of seminary at Garrett, Chet chose to go a new route by enrolling in Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California, where Georgia Harkness had just joined the faculty as a woman theologian, not yet allowed to be ordained by the Methodist Discipline. Chet and Juanita enjoyed living in the Bay Area where they welcomed their first child, Leslie Marie, and Nita was hired to be a vocalist in the Berkeley Congregational Church.

Chet enjoyed the academics and had the unique experience of serving as chaplain for Alcatraz employee families. They'd leave from Fisherman's Wharf early on Sunday mornings to ride on a mostly empty passenger boat, usually in thick fog, to get to the island to lead worship and often play games with employees and their children. On a couple of memorable occasions, some of the prisoners were allowed to join in softball games.

Back in Iowa in 1956, Chet was appointed to serve Akron Methodist Church, later adding the neighboring Westfield Congregational Church. Four children, Naomi Lisa, Kimberly Suzanne, Sandra Leigh, and William Hayes were born during the Akron years. Tragically, Leslie Marie died in a freak hammock accident on the parsonage front porch.

Northwest Iowa experienced a severe drought during Chet's seven-year residence, making finances difficult for the many farmers in the congregation. When it was voted to build an educational unit for the church, they chose a Biblical practice and gleaned the cornfields to raise money.

A significant event during his time at Akron happened when Chet became an exchange pastor for the Kansas City Centennial Methodist Church, claiming to be the largest Black Methodist congregation in the nation. Rev. Ed Bolton, chairperson for the Conference Board of Church and Society, conceived this exchange as part of an effort to prepare Iowa Methodists for the transition that was coming. For years Black Methodists were segregated into what was called the Central Jurisdiction. All other jurisdictions were based on geography. The goal was to integrate all Black and white

congregations into geographical United Methodist Conferences, not based on skin color. Given his ongoing concern about racism, Chet eagerly volunteered to participate. He took his family (minus the very young William Hayes) and arrived at the Kansas City parsonage on a Saturday noon, where the Guinns were warmly welcomed with a delicious meal.. Chet was nervous because he knew his preaching style was very different from what the Centennial congregation usually experienced.

After lunch that first day in Kansas City, Chet received a phone call from the wife of the Church School Superintendent informing him that her husband had been arrested and therefore would not be available for Sunday School. Chet did what he would have done if he were in Akron—go to the courthouse to find out the details. He was directed to a judge who threatened to put him in jail for meddling.

Chet became deeply involved in the Black community and at one point was spit on by a policeman when he was part of an all-Black group picketing a dime store that wouldn't hire a Black woman for manager, even though she was well qualified for the position. Ignoring her *Master's Degree in mathematics*, the interviewers claimed that she was unable to make change!

Chet's next appointment was Emmetsburg, where he also served seven years. At that time there was a great deal of interest in ecumenicity, and he collaborated with the pastors of the Congregational and Episcopal churches on several projects: common newsletter, a combined youth group, a storefront Senior Citizen Center, Youth Center in a former

adult pool hall, a coffee hour for college students at the Waverly Hotel where there were many conversations dealing with current issues of the day. One of the “regulars” was Bob Pratt who became the Federal District Court Judge, Southern District of Iowa.

When the Vietnam War was raging, the ecumenical peace community sponsored a peace rally on the Palo Alto County courthouse lawn led by a New York Episcopal priest. The large crowd so frightened Palo Alto County law officials that they had all highways entering Emmetsburg blocked!

The summer of 1964 was a critical time in the struggle against racism in Mississippi, where violence included the burning of Black churches and the killing of Blacks and their white supporters. The National Council of Churches (NCC) was among the organizations forming the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) dedicated to voter registration, organizing freedom schools for children of all ages, encouraging church inclusiveness, etc. Chet and the Rev. James King, American Baptist pastor from Dayton, Ohio, were assigned to represent NCC in Jackson, Mississippi.

Chet tells with a smile about the evening before he drove to Mississippi when a loyal church trustee, David Amspoker, knocked on the parsonage back door, took Chet’s right hand and firmly placed a pistol in it. He reminded Chet that Mississippi was a war zone, and that for the sake of Nita and the four Guinn children he should do whatever necessary to protect himself. Chet was deeply moved but had to decline the offer.



Chet, Juanita, and family



The next move for Chet and his family was to Perry, where he experienced a rocky beginning. He held a series of neighborhood meetings to learn what church members felt needed priority attention. The outstanding concern, especially from young families, was a program appealing to youth. Based on the positive experiences with the youth group in Emmetsburg and the Coaster Coffee House at Arnold's Park on Lake Okoboji, he set about to establish something similar in Perry. As it happened, the church had a large gym (actually the site of the first girls high school basketball state tournament!), and this seemed ideal for a youth center. Parents of youth spent money and many hours restoring the gym for youth athletic and social events, including popular music for dancing. False rumors of immoral behavior spread like wildfire.

In addition, Chet became involved in an incident even more divisive for the congregation. A special session of the Methodist General Conference had been called for the purpose of working out details for the merger of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Chet and Juanita attended the Conference, held in St. Louis in 1968.

On Saturday evening before the opening Sunday morning worship, a group of college students, calling themselves the Yellow Submarines (a Beate's reference to early Christians who sometimes referred to themselves as whales), met in East St. Louis. They were concerned about the economic plight of the people of East St. Louis and wanted to bring that concern to the General Conference. They had talked with the pastor of the "St. Louis Methodist Cathedral"

(church) Rev. Dr. J. Lester McGee, who assured them they could offer a prayer during the Sunday morning worship service. They arrived early for the service, sat in the balcony, prepared to worship and share a prayer but were never called on to offer their prayer. So the youth stood, and asked to be allowed to pray, but their request was not granted and they were soon ushered out of the sanctuary.

As the service resumed, an Episcopal priest sitting in the balcony stood and in a loud voice informed the pastor and congregation that the youth were being arrested. The treatment of the young people seemed so contrary to the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” which had just been sung, that Chet stood, tore his bulletin in two, shouting, “Is liturgy made for man, or is man made for liturgy?” He and Juanita were sitting in a pew at the back of the nave when a plainclothesman asked Chet to come with him and motioned for Chet to follow him. Chet refused to leave. When Chet refused, the well-dressed officer slid by other worshippers in the pew and pulled on a sleeve of Chet’s suit coat. Juanita pulled on the other sleeve to keep him there, but she lost the tug of war and Chet was ultimately arrested and chains put on his ankles. Bob Williams, another Iowa pastor, also objected to the treatment of the students and was arrested.

As Chet was being forcefully removed, Juanita walked to the altar at the front of the church and knelt in prayer. Others in attendance joined her. A police officer approached her and offered to take her to her husband. She responded, “No! You bring my husband to me!” Bishop Short, who was to be the preacher of the day, declared the service ended. The closing hymn was changed from “How Happy Every Child of Grace” to “I Want a Principle Within.”

Chet, Bob and the students spent their jail time in a spontaneous songfest of freedom songs before Bishop Thomas (presiding Bishop of the Iowa Annual Conference) was able to arrange for them to be released.

Of course, the news traveled quickly to Perry via Des Moines newspapers reporting that Rev. Chet Guinn had been arrested and charged with crossing a state line to create a riot. Many Perry residents were angry about Chet's "behavior." In fact, they were so angry that a petition was circulated to have him removed as pastor of the Perry Church. It was signed by 400+ persons.

In response, Bishop Thomas, at the urging of his assistant Wayne Shoemaker, scheduled a meeting with the Perry congregation. Arriving in Perry the Bishop was greeted by sidewalk picketers carrying explicit signs calling for Chet's dismissal. The pews in the nave were filled. During the meeting one church member, a main street business owner, offered the Bishop \$200,000 if he would remove Chet. With flashing eyes and trembling lips, Bishop Thomas answered "For one million dollars or any amount of money, Chet will not be moved and he WILL be your pastor!" And so he was for ten years.

Prior pastors had started a building program because structural engineers had determined that the church roof dome was structurally unsound and could collapse, seriously injuring or even killing persons in the balcony. With that grim prospect, worship services were moved by trustee action to the gym, during which time, and following his pattern of building programs in each of the churches he

served, a new church building was constructed including the largest tracker action pipe organ in Iowa. The organ was designed by Iowa Drake University music professor Carl Staplin. This led to the creation of a Fine Arts Program that is still in existence.

During his ten years in Perry, many youth work trips were held to the Black Hills, Minnesota, and Mexico. The newly formed chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) held its first retreat in the Perry Church gym and Chet was elected the first president.

However, there was a very sad note during the time in Perry, for it was during those years that Juanita contracted ALS, a disease that to this day has no known cause or cure. She volunteered to allow medical researchers in the San Francisco Presbyterian Hospital to use her to experiment with various drugs in the hope they might discover one that would attack ALS. She did this until she was unable to fly to California, but ultimately succumbed to the disease, leaving Chet to finish raising four children. The Perry Church members helped as much as possible to ease the grief and give support to a pastor who had become beloved.

Throughout his life Chet has been a fierce advocate, not only for opposing racism, but also for social justice issues and for opposing war and militarism. His next appointment, United Methodist Urban Minister of Des Moines, gave him an ideal platform for pursuing those passions. Because he wanted to live near the issues he was confronting, he sought a house in the inner city.

With the help of a realtor friend, Chet became interested in old Fire Station #4, built in 1906, but boarded up and vacant for 20 years. His acquisition of it is a long story of how, with the help of Adrian Anderson, Historic Preservation Officer for all of Iowa, and many citizen champions for preserving structures with historic and architectural features, he waged a successful lawsuit against the Des Moines City Council and bought it for one dollar, a story in itself.

This resulted in a major restoration project. He completely renovated the fire station, with a beautiful living area upstairs and space downstairs for meetings. Ronald Reagan was president, and it was a very hard time for poor people in the city. During the next four years, several programs to combat these conditions were initiated. Soup kitchens were started around the city; a Tool Lending Library was established in the fire station and with the support of Governor Ray, many services for handicapped persons were made available.

The historic fire station became home for the Des Moines Housing Council, STAR*PAC, Urban Mission Council, Spina Bifida Association, the National Conference for Christians and Jews, and more. The Food Bank of Iowa was “born” around the Fire Station kitchen table with strong support from the founder/owner of Hy-Vee stores.

During the renovation, many volunteer workers, including a little United Nations of community youth, pitched in to meet the one-year completion deadline set by the City Council. Rev. Jim Pemble performed the important task of keeping the floors swept and the trash hauled out.



2005



Among the many helpers in the major restoration work was the Traer vocal music teacher, Eloise Cranke. Chet recalls with appreciation the hours she spent stripping stubborn paint from wainscoting, doors, window frames, etc. They were already well-acquainted through membership in the Iowa United Methodist Annual Conference Board of Church and Society and MFSA. Eloise's interest in social issues lured her from teaching to becoming Executive Director of Hawthorn Hill, followed by eight years as Regional Director for American Friends Service Committee, both based in Des Moines.

Eloise became Chet's significant other, biking Iowa trails frequently with him when weather permitted. By car and plane they traveled much of the United States from Florida to Maine, from California to Hawaii and Alaska, Canada, and most European nations. She was hostess for countless meetings at Old Fire Station #4 and deserves credit for invaluable services performed for the many groups meeting in Old Fire Station #4. Chet and Eloise both received Bishop Dingman Peace awards in 2007.

During that same time Chet participated in vigils and demonstrations opposing the war in Iraq, organized clergy to support Native Americans at Wounded Knee, and was arrested a number of times for his peace witness. A memorable arrest was at the Pentagon, Washington D, C., where he and his daughter, Naomi, shared a jail cell in Alexandria, Virginia for several hours with Daniel Ellsberg, author of "The Pentagon Papers."

Chet did not keep a record of his arrests, but two instances are etched in his memory: one, friend Bill Basinger and Chet were ticketed for trespassing at the Offut Airbase in Omaha, blindfolded, taken to a remote rural area and released to find their way home; And two, group of trespassers at the Des Moines airbase were tried in the Federal Court House in East Des Moines by a judge who gave each of the defendants five minutes to tell why they trespassed. When they provided this information, the judge pronounced them guilty, fined them each \$5.00 and dismissed them with the advice "Keep up the good work!"

Chet continued to write letters to the editor and to legislators, visited their offices and worked with MFSA.

Chet received numerous awards for his peace and justice work. In addition to the Dingman Peace Award, he received MFSA's Social Action Award (Iowa), The Lee and Mae Ball Award (National MFSA), the CityView Activist for Peace award, a Certificate of Recognition from the Justice Reform Consortium, and on his 90th birthday the City of Des Moines gave him Special Recognition for his justice and peace work, calling him "an asset to the City."

Some pleasant Fire House #4 memories for many friends of Chet: Presidential candidate Jesse Jackson sliding down the brass fire pole; Minnesota Senator Wellstone hugging the fire pole shortly before his untimely death in a plane crash; Mayor Frank Cownie receiving the Mayors for Peace Award presented by staff members from Oakland, California ; Iowans for Peace Ice Cream Social with hosts Ben and Jerry.

After retiring from active United Methodist ministry, Chet was employed from 1984 to 2004 by his creative engineer friend, Arden Borgen, filling several positions, but finally as a salesperson for supermarket refrigeration units featuring all glass doors—considered for years in the industry to be impossible. Arden continues to do the impossible and is copied by competitors.

During his "retirement" Chet organized and chaired a "Peace Monument Committee" with strong leadership from the late Karla Hansen (secretary), Joe Coppola, Jerry Swinton, Charles Dieken, Charles Day, Ron Dinsdale and others. They failed to convince the state legislature to allow a peace monument on the Capitol grounds. But with great cooperation from the mayor, they did succeed in working

with the Civic Center to improve and maintain the Peace Garden in Cowles Commons (formerly Nollen Plaza). Originally conceived by Bishop Maurice Dingman and Rabbi Jay Goldberg, the Peace Garden had been neglected and forgotten, but the Peace Monument Committee was able to work with the prize-winning park designer, Ken Smith, the Cowles Foundation and Des Moines Civic Center to bring it back to life. The Committee was allowed to submit brief peace quotes, from which 10 were chosen by the designer and now can be seen on the benches throughout the Peace Garden.

The Committee then raised funds and hired artist Ron Dinsdale to create a significant sculpture entitled, "Path of Peace" for the southeast corner of the DMACC Urban Campus. Dinsdale transformed a 14-ton piece of Indiana Bedford limestone into a striking peace statement of three intertwined doves.

The Committee in a final action erected a Henry Wallace marker on the five acres of Grace United Methodist Church land, where the teenage Wallace experimented with corn. The adult Henry was a passionate advocate for peace, and like Albert Einstein, opposed the Manhattan project dedicated to developing nuclear weapons.

While the Committee is no longer in existence, Chet continues to dream of future projects to honor people like Bob Ray and Harold Hughes, Iowans who contributed to the cause of justice and peace. And Chet continues to speak out for the cause of justice and peace, writing letters and speaking at peace rallies, most recently against the war in Ukraine and the ongoing threat of nuclear warfare.



Eloise and Chet with
Anna Blaedel and her
MFSA Social Action
Award, June 2017



Design by Kate Milligan

Printed by Carter Printing
Des Moines, Iowa

Path of Peace Monument



Path of Peace
Indiana Bedford Limestone
by Dinsdale, Sculptor and Native of Iowa
The intertwined doves remind all who pass by here
that education is the foundation for a just and peaceful world.
Commissioned by the Iowa Peace Monument Committee
DEDICATED SEPTEMBER 24, 2012
IOWA AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGE, URBAN CAMPAIGN

