

THEOLOGY | CRITIQUE | REVIEW | ESSAY | CULTURE

# salt&light

Summer Edition 2014

## A Goodly Place On A Goodly Journey

Tim Lién

Kindred Spirits  
Son of a Preacher Man  
Movable Feast  
Reflections  
Testimony of Love  
The Lien's and RCS

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# FROM THE EDITOR

"Change is inevitable," I was told in numerous management conferences and books during my working career. Change is inevitable except that the Lord we worship is an unchangeable God who works His sovereign will in all things. Because of this, change has become inevitable in our church. Our much-beloved minister, Tim Lien, his wife Melissa, and their wonderful children have been called by an unchangeable God to begin a church plant in Los Angeles. We celebrate their time here in this issue of *Salt & Light*.

We begin with Tim's article, *A Goodly Place on a Goodly Journey*. By turns, humorous, serious, tender, and touching, Tim reprises his ten-year God-honoring stay at Riverwood. His love for this church fills these pages, both in his article but also in the articles of others.

Next up, don't miss Prathima Ryali-Hancock's heartfelt tribute to her dear friend Melissa Lien in *Kindred Spirits and Covenant Friendships*. Prathima speaks to relationships with friends and then places that same relationship in a church setting. Her friendship with Melissa is special, as you will see from her article.

Peggy Drinkard, our Director of Children's Ministries, worked together with Tim as our youth minister in a very special way and became close friends with Tim and Melissa and ministered to their children. In *Son of a Preacher Man*, she demonstrates a special view of Tim. You will enjoy reading it as she speaks of his ministry with humor, grace and love.

My article, *A Moveable Feast*, details my special relationship with Tim, Melissa and their family. It is not often that someone of my age is close friends with someone Tim's age on so many levels. It happened, though, and Tim became my friend, my confidant, my comforter, and, supremely, my pastor.

Tim's first exposure to West Alabama was as an intern to Dr. Tom Kay in Aliceville. Dr. Kay taught him much in the daily work of being a pastor. In *Reflections on Tim Lien*, he speaks to those early days.

Vetta Lavender also had a special relationship – almost mother-like – with Tim, dating back to the Aliceville days and extending to his time at Riverwood. Read about it here in *A Testimony of Love*.

The Liens' love for, and exposure to, Riverwood Classical School was absolutely critical to the school. Tim and Melissa loved and served the school faithfully. Kimberly Staggs tells the story in *A Most Amazing Academic Adventure*.

Finally, in our Finale piece, Herman Melville and I consider the importance and the significance of the pulpit and Tim's filling of it in *The Preacher*.

# A Goodly Place On A Goodly Journey

By Tim Lien

*“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive:  
for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts;  
and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been,  
is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”*

George Eliot (last sentence from *Middlemarch*)

Shortly after seminary and two weeks after Melissa and I landed in Tuscaloosa, I was given the envied lead upon the bright stage of Riverwood’s Vacation Bible School. It was a highly technical role, filled with complex character shifting and development. I was Casey the Suitcase. The Costume Department went all out, too. A vinyl yellow suitcase was procured, holes cut out for arms and legs. Skin tight leggings were shipped in from Milan. Or Gordo, I can’t remember which.

The script was free-ranging, allowing a true actor to display his craft. “Just tell some jokes,” it read. But the subtext was clearly genius. Opening night was unforgettable: I burst out onto the stage, arms akimbo and breathless (a tiny improvised touch), “Helloooo, boys and girls! I’m Casey! I just flew in from New York....and, man, are my arms *tired!*” Silence reigned. I knew then that the audience had immediately caught the finer nuances of Casey’s misunderstood childhood, aimless searching, and existential angst.

The critics were nonplussed, however—fearful even. Meredith Patridge and Olivia Staggs began bawling. I took this to mean that I had successfully displayed the enduring *pathos* and

plight of comic suitcases, until some horrified mothers hurried them away to find some Kool-Aid. Strangely, I was never asked to reprise the role.

Fast forward.

One fine, slightly humid Sunday evening, the youth group assembled 180 empty cardboard boxes, and constructed a Great 12x15 Wall out in the parking lot. It looked pretty impressive. Nineteen kids piled in, on, and astride my Ford Ranger. Video evidence shows an illegal, unsafe load. But without the clarity of hindsight, I revved the engine and we smashed through the unsuspecting Wall. I am not so sure why we did that, but youth work is an imprecise, fledgling science. There was unanimous agreement that what had just transpired was “awesome.” I want to say that all the cardboard was dutifully recycled, but my memory fogs at this point.

Fast forward.

And who can forget the Sponge Bob Caper of Aught Four? I sure can’t. Burger King had just launched a huge summer promotion, targeting children with their fried chicken bits ‘n gristle. Huge inflatable Sponge Bobs appeared atop Burger Kings nationwide. And then they

began to disappear. Oddly, the same thing happened to the Burger King near Riverwood. *Allegedly*, Brett Bond and Daniel DuBose had lovingly adopted the lonely Bob, and placed him in the nurturing care of the Riverwood Barn. But one has to grudgingly admire their fearless plan. Daniel had (*allegedly*) absconded official-looking hard hats and reflective vests from his grandfather (Minter Patterson). They (*allegedly*) simply drove up to Burger King at midday, placed a ladder, and set Mr. Bob free. Casting blame is unfruitful at this point, but I can sincerely and honestly say that I [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] and condemn any semblance of this kind of behavior.

Peggy Drinkard had enough sense to tell me to take it back. Thank you, Peggy.

Fast forward.

Why do I regale you of these youthful shenanigans? Because, let's be honest: this is who you called to be your pastor. It will be no use to drizzle sugary glaze upon the facts. History is of no use if you revise it to your liking.

And this is where I leave all humorous frippery and become oh-so serious. But serious does not mean joyless, boring, or absent of deeply-felt emotion. It just means that I want to lock eyes and dwell on things that make my soul swell when I remember them.

Riverwood family, I cannot write this without choking back weird lumps and bubbles. I cannot write this without feeling a deep gratitude to my God, and to you—his people. You have loved me and my family. It has been a generous, joyful, steady, patient, constant, and

loyal love. You saw that God had given you a minister in-the-rough. You saw what God was making, and you did not demand a more hurried pace than His own.

My heart swells because I did not deserve this.

You received the Word with gladness. When I became consumed with arcane arguments and commentaries, when I fought the struggles of my own heart, when I railed against shadowy foes, when I tried to impress, when I took the academic road instead of leading you to Calvary's path, when I was obscure, confusing, and longwinded—you overlooked my weaknesses and grabbed the Word.

You endured an immature leader, decisions that fell flat, enthusiasms that withered, ill-advised busyness, questionable strategies, and things that fell through the cracks. When I think of the Atonement as a covering, I also think of you covering my weaknesses in kind—not excusing them, but covering them with great charity and longsuffering.

Not all has been difficult or failure, however. We experienced God's tangible gifts of grace in word, prayer, baptism, and communion. We've labored together, questioned together, struggled together. We munched and danced together—reveling and celebrating joys small and large. We have seen new families beginning in marriage and commitment. We have seen families grow the old-fashioned way—both in birth and adoption. We have buried loved ones in the name and victory of Jesus. We have grieved, mourned, cried, and made piles of tasty casseroles. The trials and pain have been inexplicable gifts without price. We have taught each other, created new things together, and protected good and old things together. Our

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# Kindred Spirits and Covenant Friendships

By Prathima Ryali-Hancock

At a recent Riverwood Valentine's Tea, I spoke on the love of a good friend. I talked about how women are designed to be relational, not just in today's society, but starting at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him." Women were created **for** relationship. This is why women can talk for hours with each other, why we can enjoy quality time over a cup of coffee and take sustenance from it, and why we want to know what's going on in people's thoughts. In 1976, Jean Baker Miller, a feminist psychiatrist, published *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. She suggested that for women the primary motivation throughout life is towards establishing a basic sense of connection to others. She acknowledged exactly *the opposite* of what the women's movement was trying to establish and argued that men and women were fundamentally different in how we approach relationships. Women produce a hormone called oxytocin, which promotes bonding, affiliation, and enhances maternal instinct. We tend to be more empathetic, in general, than men.

Anne Shirley of Green Gables, that great character of fiction built by L.M. Montgomery, waxed poetic about having a "bosom friend" or a "kindred spirit" in her hometown of Avonlea.

She defined what exactly it means to have one: "A bosom friend--an intimate friend, you know--[is] a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul. I've dreamed of meeting her all my life." She found one in her childhood best friend, Diana.

In the church, we talk about kindred spirits a bit differently; for us, they are the relationships that we build within our covenant family. Our Riverwood family is the one we will be spending eternity with, as messy as it is. I've realized the quality of the relationships we build at Riverwood actually reflect our understanding of the gospel. By this,



I mean that our understanding of Jesus's sacrificial love is shown in our sacrificial love towards each other. Our understanding of Jesus's complete and finished work and our inability to contribute to that, to be a part of our own salvation, can be reflected in how real our relationships are with each other, how we can confess our sins to one another, and how we ask for accountability from each other. The way that we handle hard and tragic times with church members who are hurting, when we don't know what to say and what to do, reflects our understanding of God's sovereignty and willingness to bear each other's burdens.

# I've realized the quality of the relationships we build at Riverwood actually reflect our understanding of the gospel

How does this work? Why should we care about “bosom friends,” especially within the church? Why are relationships within the church so important? Why is covenant community such a mark of our denomination? Paul David Tripp and Timothy Lane write about this quite compellingly in their book, Relationships, A Mess Worth Making. They say, “*What happens in the messiness of relationships is that our hearts are revealed, our weaknesses are exposed, and we start coming to the end of ourselves. Only when this happens do we reach out for the help God along can provide. Weak and needy people finding their hope in Christ’s grace are what mark a mature relationship. The more dangerous aspect of your relationships is not your weakness, but your delusions of strength. Self-reliance is almost always a component of a bad relationship. While we would like to avoid the mess and enjoy deep and intimate community, God says that it is in the very process of working through the mess that intimacy is found.*” It’s true that my weaknesses are exactly what I don’t want to expose. My faults, my sins, my lack of abilities are what I don’t want others to see. But Tripp and Lane also say, “*The very thing we would naturally seek to avoid is what God has chosen to use to make us more like him. . . . We often think that if God really cared for us, he would make our relationships easier. In reality, a difficult relationship is a mark of his love and care. We would prefer that God would just change the relationship, but he won’t be content until the relationship changes us too.*”

The person who shared these quotes and thoughts with me and taught me about

covenant friendships (while she was learning, too!) is a dear, “bosom friend” of mine. Her name is Melissa Lien. I had the fortune of getting to know her when Tim was shepherding the youth group. I joined in on a youth trip to Panama City Beach one year as the resident helper and kitchen maid. There is nothing like chaperoning a bunch of youth to bring you closer in relationship with someone else, because your desire to lean on God’s providence is magnified when providing spaghetti to a herd of youth, day in and day out. Tim got sick on that trip (again, providentially), so she and I did our best to make sure the group was having fun while Tim puked and did little lessons on the side.

Since then, we’ve shared quite a few experiences together. There have been many events at church, and since we both like to be behind the camera, we found ourselves talking quite a bit over church newsletters, website pictures, and making sure we had memories of the picnics, VBS, baby showers, and the Reformation Celebration captured. We had competitive times playing Bunco and realized we had a similar sense of humor. The competition extended itself to cupcake competitions, and we know absolutely no bounds on that kind of smack talk. She allows me to be real with her; we often joke with each other about who can put the most “fake” pictures on Facebook of our families looking like we’ve had a perfect time together, when really there was hair-pulling or bodily harm inflicted prior to a “beautiful” pose. We often threaten to put inflammatory comments

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# Son of a Preacher Man

## Thoughts on the Lien Family

by Peggy Drinkard

There is so much mystery in the world, so much magic, so much that is improbable and fantastical. Science has shown us that one little leaf, one tiny droplet of water – the tiniest things we know – hold within them whole worlds. Their existence ramifies up and down and in and out in what appears to be infinite scope. Turns out that, hidden from our view, there are microcosmic ocean depths and flying, spinning, flinging galaxies around every corner and under every fingernail. It's exciting and exasperating at once; so much mystery....so little time.

The existence of the unseen in plain view is one reason I am fond of nature studies. I love to watch the birds and their ways; I love to garden and see the variety of beauty and intricacy built into the simplest things. I like to discover the patterns and to see in them the signature of God. King David described it best in Psalm 19 when he said, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard."

For similar reasons I like to study people. Like the rest of nature, man, with his multilayered complexities, and specifically the uniqueness of each individual man, fascinates me. Mankind bears his own particular likeness to his author because God choose to stamp onto him His own image. I don't think there's a single soul, from the most amoebic dullard to the savants and

Einsteins, who doesn't possess within himself a world of interesting qualities, histories, and features from which to learn and over which to marvel. Everyone who crosses my path interests me, so it was with happy anticipation and no small curiosity that I awaited, ten years ago, the arrival of our church's new staff member, Tim Lien, and his family.

At the time Tim was coming to Riverwood in the capacity of Assistant Pastor and "youth guy." Since I direct our children's ministries, I knew we'd inevitably become collaborators in shared responsibilities, so I began early on to assemble a notion of who he was and what I could expect. I knew he was about to become a graduate of Covenant Seminary, a fact I respected. I found he was a native Californian, so he'd probably be a bit of a hipster, I reasoned. Somewhere along the way I learned Tim was one of seven children, that his own father had been a pastor affiliated with the Chuck Swindoll ministries, and that their relationship was still a work in progress. All of this interested me. I knew he'd had the good sense to choose a lovely, smart wife. Best of all, I knew they had just started their own family with the most gorgeous baby girl imaginable. That put me in my element and earned him serious points before his feet even hit the ground here.

Then one early-summer day in 2004, hit the ground they did! It didn't take long to realize that Tim and Melissa were a team that *ran* most of the time, on all cylinders. They were energetic, hardworking, multi-talented and

## Tim and Melissa were a team that ran most of the time, on all cylinders. They were energetic, hardworking, multi-talented and whole-hearted in their commitment

whole-hearted in their commitment to the work that fell to them. I was impressed with their capacity for vision, and relieved to discover their strengths were peppered with large doses of wit and clever, good humor. They were good thinkers, good readers, generous and thoughtful, so it became easy to find in them more than co-workers. We quickly became friends. I enjoyed watching them grow and mature and learn in the ministry, as parents, and as people. Along the way, three more children were added to their brood. I was blessed to teach most of them in several capacities, and to babysit them from time to time, and the children became my friends as well.

The nature of time is that it seems to move too fast. The ten years of our acquaintance has flown by. We've shared a lot as partners in ministry and as fellow believers. We've seen some happy, improbable triumphs, many answered prayers, and more than a few amazing "God-things" as I like to call unexpected providences. There have also been discouragements and heart-wrenching pain, particularly in times of suffering in the congregation. There were times of exhaustion and tension, uncertainty and fears, and times of sickness. There was the unexpected tornado of 2011 that turned everyone's world upside down and sent everyone scrambling to respond. We've exulted together in the certainties of our faith, given mutual encouragement, and at times, a bit of loving exhortation. Most of all, we have loved Christ together. I think we've pretty well

run the full gamut of Christian friendship and fellowship, and I've become comfortable with having the Liens around.

The news of their new calling hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks. I confess I find it difficult even now to be as happy or enthusiastic about it as I should. In fact, I have grieved the last few months over my perceived "loss." I had long-term visions involving births and graduations and weddings and grandchildren and funerals. However, this is hardly the first time my plans and God's plans turn out not to be the same. Samuel Rutherford wisely advised, "When the Lord's blessed will bloweth cross your desires, it is best, in humility, to strike sail to Him, and to be willing to be led any way our Lord pleaseth," and I'm working on that. I certainly have no doubt the work they have been called to is a vital one for which they seem tailor-made. I can see, too, the impress of God's hand preparing them for this new place. They have vision, but they are not naïve. They know how to lead, but they are not above following. I believe God will use them mightily in their new field, and I know He will use the new field to continue shaping the Liens more closely to His own image. For all this, for all they have done for our church, for the personal blessing they are to me, I thank God.

As for people studies, the Lien story provides much fuel for fodder. Just think: in His all-wise orchestration God took a son of Scandinavia from California and a lovely, gracious Southern

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# A Moveable Feast

## The Liens: Memories and Ministry at Riverwood

by Jimmy Hopper

“Incredible! It is the *Blinis Demidoff*!”

General Loewenhielm speaks at  
*Babette’s Feast* by Isak Dinesen

Where to begin? Through the weal, woe and welter of a life lived, the retrospective look turns first to significance. Suffice it to say, Tim and Melissa and their family were very, very significant to my wife and myself during the past ten years, this portion of the life I have lived before God and man. As I write this, I am fully aware that anything I say will probably embarrass Tim. It cannot be helped because my course here is not the same as that of Brutus. I come to praise Tim, not to bury him (as he noted, this is not truly a “memorial”). Tim gets nervous when he is praised; so just know, Tim, that everything I say is out of love and gratitude to you and yours. It is a deep gratitude. Gratitude for our friendship, for understanding, for love, and especially for your ministry that fed us constantly with the grace and wonder of our Lord.

That ten years seems a short time now as I look back and to the future. The first “official” meeting seems like yesterday. It was one of those warm times when you are with friends, good food, with soft lamplight in a warm setting. Carolyn and I were at the Grahams’ home together with other officers and wives of Riverwood to meet our new Youth Minister, Tim Lien, and his wife. I remember Tim being especially warm to me and I thought that perhaps Bryan Bond, our pastor, had put in a

good word since even then I was approaching curmudgeon age and Tim was very young. Toward the end of the evening Bryan prevailed on Tim to do a voice impersonation of me and this tall, very articulate, young minister seemed nervous about how I would accept it. He finally did a brief impersonation and it was hilarious. Tim seemed relieved and in his interpretation of me, I had my first intimation of Tim’s ear, how completely he took in everything that was said - inflections, body language and meanings - on more than one level. I would learn how important that was as I watched him in his interactions with others and saw how he subsequently dealt with relationships.

The Riverwood youth group literally loved him. He played with them, worked with them, laughed with them, traveled with them, ate with them.....and taught them. To their despair, he was with them only two years, and at the parting there were tears and perhaps even some gnashing of teeth. Bryan had accepted another call, and Tim became the Senior Pastor of Riverwood in maybe the simplest pastoral search of ecclesiastical history. The Session asked him; he (and Melissa, of course) agreed; a package was agreed upon; and Riverwood quickly voted him in.

Tim began to preach at Riverwood in the old sanctuary and his nervousness quickly disappeared as he went about doing what he was born to do and what the Lord in His perfect wisdom had called him to do. The new church

he will start in California will quickly discover that their Pastor is a “quick study” as he interacts with a new and different culture. They will find that he is now a very polished but very intense preacher.

At Riverwood, Tim preached the Gospel, whether he was in the book of Matthew, Hosea, Corinthians, or Leviticus, he preached Jesus and His grace. Every Sunday he preached Jesus and in that preaching we came to know how inexhaustible the source of grace and joy is in our Lord. I have heard many sermons in a long life but almost every time Tim preached, there was something new, something now known that I hadn’t known, some different and important angle that mattered, something I have begun to think of as “preaching on the edges.” He preached the center, the Gospel, but he preached it on the edges - unique, in context, fascinating. How many times Robert Thornton and I (he sits close to us) turned to each other after the sermon with “Did you get that?” “Isn’t that great to hear and know?” It was always of grace, of grace through Jesus, and it was sweet to me, sweet and beautiful, and prodigious, too big to even imagine as I would learn one terrible Spring.

I was retired, but was asked to work two days each week at the church to do some Elder things since we didn’t have an assistant pastor. I agreed (“Please don’t throw me in that briar patch,” the sly rabbit said to the fox). Working at Riverwood, my Pastor became even more my friend, a friendship that became close and very dear to me. I have been amazed by it in

one respect because it is an extraordinarily close friendship for two men who had a 37-year age difference. No one could have ever told me that when I was in my 70’s, one of the best of my friends would be a man in his thirties without an ounce of condescension towards me in him. We talked. He called our talks “download sessions.” They were usually on Tuesday mornings and we talked about everything.

We talked theology, culture, problems, Riverwood, Sunday’s sermon, extended families, past histories, getting along with wives and children, politics, philosophy, Southern culture, California culture, sports, and books. We always talked books. Tim is a reader. He doesn’t read to pass the time or for entertainment, or even for education. He reads because he has to. He reads because reflection is part of who he is. Tim reads for the same reason the adventurer climbed Mt. Everest: “because it’s there.” He reads but he doesn’t read as most men read. A mutual friend, Jeff Miller, once told me that “Tim doesn’t read as I read. He always reads on more than one level.” He does, in the same way that he listens and hears, and that also is part of his gift.

People he associates with are readers, and many, but not all, are Christian readers. They also read, and share their books and impressions with him. When a connection happened and the discussion was about an especially interesting piece of literature, an interesting type of interaction between Tim and I would also happen. Tim would come in my office with a particular smile and a twinkle (sorry, it’s the only word that fits) in his eye and he would say,

**we were still ...shaken by it all, by the needlessness of it, by the ultimate evil of death**



# Tim sees everything through a Gospel lens. The real base and background of his life and ministry is the work and the wonder of Jesus, his Lord

“Have you read anything by Isak Dinesen?” I would respond, wondering what he’s found, “Well, yes. I read *Out of Africa*.” His delight was palpable. “Have you read this?” he asked and showed me the title of the story in his hand. It is named *Babette’s Feast*. A fellow minister who reads told him about it. “No, I haven’t read it. Wasn’t there a movie made of it?” I ask. Tim responded, “Yes. But you have to read it. Are you doing anything tonight? Can you read it when you get home? It’s not long. You can read it in an hour.”

So I took it home and read it, and I was as excited as he is. We meet and his first words are “What did you think?” We talked of grace, of Communion, of Covenant demonstrated in that short piece. We spoke of grace as great as the feast. We spoke of a future feast in which people at odds with each other suddenly love each other (who they have seen) and love God (who they had not seen) as the people she wrote about did. We talked of how the author who wrote *Out of Africa* could have even conceived of writing *Babette’s Feast*. In reading and sharing we have something else we care about and now share as friends. In the following weeks, every time something good would happen, or either of us found something interesting, Tim would intone in an exact replica of the actor in the *Babette’s Feast* movie, the quote at the beginning of this piece, “Incredible! It is the *Blinis Demidoff*!”\*

The phrase was a way of saying, great, excellent, perfect, top of the hill, etc. and was both funny and meaningful to us.

There are many other instances. Dozens of them. In hearing Tim’s sermons, you almost surely remember references to the Southern novelist, Walker Percy, and the essay he introduced me to as the title piece in his book, *The Message in the Bottle*. In that brilliant piece, Tim used Percy’s idea of what “news” is, news from afar, from home, and why it must be proclaimed, to make his point in several sermons.

Tim took it upon himself to explore total depravity, to see what the human heart was capable of. He and I had read much of the Cormac McCarthy oeuvre, particularly *The Crossing*, *Blood Meridian*, and *No Country for Old Men*, all of which are an excellent primer, but Tim took it deeper, much deeper. He began to read extensively about the Holocaust, that most terrible chapter of depravity. We began to hear references in some of his sermons, and we began to understand evil in more depth and what our enemy is really about.

All of this is to demonstrate a wide and deep cultural, historical, anthropological, philosophical, sociological, and certainly theological ethos that informs his life and

\* *Blinis Demidoff* was the second course in *Babette’s Feast*. It consisted of small crepes served with excellent caviar and *crème fraîche*. Babette had made the dish in Paris at her restaurant and the General was astonished to find it in the small Danish town where Babette cooked for the small church there.

## **...you are called by God, all of you, and God will be with you and will be glorified by your call....**

work. This is part of his gift, but this is only a background, only the beginning of his vision and his great gifts for ministry. The end of it all is that ultimately everything he reads, every conversation he has, every movie he views, every interview, every interaction, every magazine article, everything, is filtered through the Word of God and the Gospel of Grace that he preaches. Tim sees everything through a Gospel lens. The real base and background of his life and ministry is the work and the wonder of Jesus, his Lord. His extensive cultural base simply adds richness and insight. In a conversation we had about a secular book, we were talking about a particular idea, and I said that “this is almost theology.” Tim smiled, and said, “Jimmy, it’s all theology.” And it is. Especially for him.

Tim has been a special minister in another sense, in the sense that he ministers to people. This is also a special gift, and he is very gifted, in this. He doesn’t shy away from anything but he ministers armed with the Gospel. Tim can tell people of their sin and they accept it because they know that he is quick to admit to his own sin. So he can address sin when its ugliness breaks down relationships and causes pain.

The Session saw this ability so many times. We saw it and saw the love and empathy he had for those he ministered to. We had, in the course of time, death in the Riverwood family, and some of it was to very young people, even to newborns and to school children. The Session received a call from Tim one hot summer night that a child of Riverwood had

a problem and was near death. He called for the Session to meet at the hospital to minister with him to parents and siblings. The pain and anguish was raw and deep and we all followed Tim in ministering to them. When it was over, when pain and exhaustion overtook the family, we were still there shaken by it all, by the needlessness of it, by the ultimate evil of death. We went to the parking lot, and standing in a circle on the still hot asphalt paving by a loading dock, Tim led us in prayer, each of us prayed out of frustration and pain for those who hurt. We prayed, and knowing that God heard, we were at peace in that knowledge. All of us still remember, and we all still speak of those moments.

A time came, a desperate time, when Carolyn and I came ourselves to the very depths of pain, loss, and despair on the terrible April night came when we learned that our daughter had taken her own life. It is still hard to remember that week. It happened on Monday night and the darkness, the pain, the unbelievable sense of loss, and the shameful guilt descended. I remember lucid moments. I remember writing her obituary at 3:00 AM. and thinking “me... here... her...this...” and the guilt and loss flooded over me again as I struggled to regain composure enough to finish.

The thing I remember now that what is left is the sense of loss, is that Tim was there. Whenever and wherever we turned, he was there, gently or strongly as the case required, bringing us back to Jesus and His grace. Carolyn and I reminisced recently of how he took our




granddaughters out on the porch and talked to them and how much it meant to them, and to us. I remember our grandson Randy singing “Joy to the World” at the top of his voice, to Tim’s amazement, and it was the first smile I had seen all week. I remember the time that I rambled almost incoherently on and on about what I hadn’t done, what I should have done, and how he looked me in the eye and said that Jesus was bigger than that; he said that even if I had been the one to pull the trigger, the grace of Jesus would cover my sin.

I remember the funeral. I remember Warren Brown comforting me. I remember the burial in Montgomery. It was just our family, her children, and Tim. I remember the girls standing with their hand on the coffin, keeping the workmen, who stood respectfully a distance away waiting, from lowering it until we finally had to gently urge the girls to leave. I remember us waiting almost desperately for Sunday, when we could worship.

I remember the Church supporting us and how we will never forget that. And Tim. With us in the morning, with us at night, doing things for us that would have been hard for us to do; telling us about God’s love and the power and the greatness and fullness of His grace and forgiveness and how He sustains us, that even then, especially then when it is darkest, Jesus is there.

I could not write this without remembering Melissa and what she has meant to us.... and to Riverwood. Without her we wouldn’t have the magazine you are reading this from. When we came to Riverwood in 1989, there was a mimeographed single sheet, front and

back; it was a newsletter called *Salt & Light*. I thought about how great it would be if we had a church magazine in which we published articles about faith, culture, theology, reviews, anything. Remember, it’s all theology. When Tim and Melissa came, we developed it, first in a multi-paged newsletter filled with color and photographs of church activities, but also with serious articles. Melissa took the photographs, designed the layout and artwork, and furnished ideas. She spent almost a week each month publishing *Salt & Light* and her work was professional and wonderfully well-done. When we went to the magazine, she set up the templates and continued for years until only recently. In the same way, she did the “Great Christian Poets” booklets for that series. She ministers also, with great love and empathy to which many at Riverwood can testify. She is a dear friend and sister for whom I have a profound respect.

So here we are. They are leaving, and the time is now only days away. A moveable feast is a Christian term, a feast day that doesn’t occur on the same day every year. Like Easter. I thought of the term as existing in time, certainly, but also geographically, since our friends are moving. The feast part works also; we have rich love and memories to feast on and so much to remind us of Tim, Melissa, Lauren, Anderson, Lainey and little Jameson. To them I say that you are called by God, all of you, and God will be with you and will be glorified by your call. When I hear of your work, or when I think back to what you have done here, perhaps I’ll also smile and say to myself, “Incredible! It is the *Blinis Demidoff*!” 

*Jimmy Hopper is a Ruling Elder at Riverwood Presbyterian Church and can be contacted at jimhop7@att.net*

# Reflections On Tim Lien

by Dr. Tom Kay

Tim was a rising senior at Bryan College when I first met him in April of 1996. David Masoner brought him to Aliceville so that I might interview him as a possible summer youth intern. Tim was sharp, and clearly had a heart for young people. Our Session hired him for the summer. Upon the completion of a unique summer, we invited Tim to join our full-time staff as our Director of Youth Ministry following his graduation from Bryan College. I was privileged to help Tim secure his first pickup truck and later an engagement ring to prepare for his marriage to Melissa.

Being a very teachable young man, I was privileged to introduce Tim to the doctrines of grace. He quickly embraced the Reformed Faith and practiced it in his ministry to our youth.

Every Monday morning we devoted time to a study of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. I required him to learn all 107 answers. Then we followed with a study of the Westminster Confession of Faith, reviewing every chapter. Following four years on our staff, Tim was called to Covenant Seminary for his formal theological training. He returned to Warrior Presbytery and to his pastoral positions at Riverwood Presbyterian Church.

I have been blessed to be a mentor and friend to Tim, and now to serve with him as a colleague in the ministry of the PCA. If

*Dr. Tom Kay - First Presbyterian Church  
Aliceville, Alabama*



*Bryan College*

# For Tim:

## A Testimony of Love from Vetta Lavender

by Vetta Lavender

Tim's first job as youth director was at First Presbyterian church in Aliceville, Alabama, in June, 2004. Two of my sons, Lamont and Lawrence, their wives, and their children (Bryant, Matthew, Daniel, Webb, Heath and Sara) belonged to that church. I got to know Tim because I often visited his church and the youth activities in which my grandchildren participated. Tim, as their Youth Director, had an impact on them that I am unable to measure. In addition to the impact he had on my Aliceville grandchildren, there was a similar impact on my Tuscaloosa granddaughter, Stefanie, and her future husband, Justin, as well as my grandson Matthew's future wife, Angela, all of whom were a part of the that Presbyterian youth group that Tim led. I have many, many memories of Tim's time in Aliceville, some I could tell about but some that won't do to tell.

One "Lavender" Christmas Eve, I was at Lawrence's house. Tim was alone in his garage apartment as he had been unable to go home for the holidays. He called and asked what we were doing. "We are going to open presents later on," was the answer. Tim asked somewhat plaintively, "Can I come watch you open presents?" Because he was always welcome at the home of any of the Lavenders, he was invited and he came. There was a present for him under the tree.

A heart-breaking tragedy struck my family on November 12, 1999. Bryant was on his way to work at Lavender, Inc., and was killed in a traffic accident. Of course, Pastor Tom Kay and Tim were called. It was a shocking and terrible thing for everyone. I believe that Tim was

affected tremendously since he was very close to Bryant and it was his first experience with death as Youth Director.

The truth is that Bryant sometimes worried Tim. I've heard that you sometimes love the child that bothers you the most. Late one night, Bryant called Tim and told him that he needed some help. As the story goes, Tim did not want to get up. His first impulse was to ask, "What have you done, Bryant? Are you in trouble?" It wasn't that at all. Someone else needed help. Bryant told him there was a woman with a baby and three children stranded in downtown Aliceville. They were going to walk to their home out in the country. Tim got up and took the family home. Tim assisted in Bryant's funeral and the title of his homily was: "A Little Man with a Big Heart."

In time, Tim left Aliceville to go to seminary. What a happy surprise I had much later when I was told that he was coming to Riverwood as Youth Director. Now it was more than Tim. He had married sweet, beautiful Melissa and they had a baby girl. Even knowing him, I still didn't realize what a blessing it would be to have him at Riverwood. In addition to his ministry, Tim has continued to be a part of my family. He assisted in my grandson Webb's wedding, and my daughter Cynthia's wedding. Tim and Melissa's daughter Laurian was a flower girl in my grandson Matthew's wedding and also Webb's wedding.

Becoming pastor at Riverwood was another first for Tim, but also for me. Because I had so many memories of him mentoring my grandchildren



# Then it became clear ... yes, the Scripture is about Grace, Grace, Grace. It is me that needs to get the message right.

and being included in my family gatherings, I especially wanted him to do well in the pulpit. It was like watching a child's music recital. When he first preached at Riverwood, I would get so anxious; I would think "Okay, Tim, that's enough illustrations!" or "Where are you going – get to the point, Tim!" And then he might shout out a phrase or word that woke us up and got our attention. And as I now confess, I sometimes wondered "what is he saying?" It's really his fault that I confess so much because I hear it preached every Sunday. The scripture is familiar but somehow this is about Grace? And he often shocked me: he used words that I (in my self-righteousness) considered offensive. Then it became clear; the word is okay and yes,

the Scripture is about Grace, Grace, Grace. It is me that needs to get the message right.

Tim, I believe when you leave Riverwood to go on a mission to plant churches, God's providence will be in control. My prayers along with many, many more prayers from people you know and have impacted in your time here will go with you. Thanks to you, Tim, for being a part of my life. ¶

*Vetta Lavender is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact her at [vettal@bellsouth.net](mailto:vettal@bellsouth.net). When Pastor Lien talks to her, she answers to "Meme."*

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## *Continued from page 2*

church has marveled at the grace of God and, in turn, extended grace to countless individuals—*at great and sacrificial personal cost.*

My kids know of no other community of belief. And you have showed them the Body of Christ. They know that a church is not where people struggle to be free, but where people are free to struggle.

To some, this will sound strange, but this is the longest I have ever lived in one place. It is a place made goodly—not by university or river—but by grace-drunk people who work in and under the name of Jesus.

My heart swells because I did not deserve this.

Jesus loves his Bride. It will not fall because of me, and it will not succeed because of any

man. It will prevail because of Jesus. And I thank God for you all. And I thank you all for reflecting his work to me, my wife, and all my kids. May God give you every good and perfect blessing. Grace and Peace to you, in enormous portions.

Tim and Melissa

*"Here vigour fail'd the tow'ring fantasy:  
But yet the will roll'd onward, like a wheel  
In even motion, by the Love impell'd,  
That moves the sun in heav'n and all the stars.*

Dante Alighieri  
(last lines of *The Divine Comedy*) ¶

*Tim Lien is the Senior Pastor at Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You can contact him at [tlien@riverwoodchurch.org](mailto:tlien@riverwoodchurch.org).*

# A Most Admirable Academic Adventure

## The Liens and Riverwood Classical School

by Kimberly Staggs

The Liens are most certainly headed off on a grand adventure to spread the gospel in Central City. Let it not be forgotten, though, that these rather normal-looking folks were grand adventurers in Tuscaloosa, as well. Back in 2004 when Tim, Melissa, and Laurian moved to Tuscaloosa, they surely did not know of this adventure, because none of us did. As time went on, though, the Liens' spirit of adventure became evident, particularly when it came to starting Riverwood Classical School.

In 2005, when Laurian was nowhere near starting Kindergarten, Peggy Drinkard, our beloved and ever-patient Director of Children's Ministries, and Blake Johnson, our classics-minded pastoral intern at the time, called together a group of parents whose children were approaching school age. Included in this group were the Liens, the Crawfords, the Millers, the Staggses, the Urbans, and others, from time to time. Peggy and Blake asked us to read books, discuss education, and pray about whether we as parents were being called to give our children both a Christian education and one that would be a little different than we had all anticipated our children would receive, namely a classical education. Tim and Melissa jumped into this mix to study, debate, and hash out ideas, even though they had plenty of time to

consider these things at leisure before it would become an issue for their own daughter.

In the end, as most are well aware, Riverwood Classical School was started. Not all of the parents who read, debated, and prayed together chose to participate in the school full-time. Some participated part-time. Some participated then moved their children elsewhere. Some waited and jumped into the school much later. However, Tim and Melissa – and Tim in particular – jumped into the school from the start, as much for the children of the church and the city he served, as for his own child.

Tim was part of the first school workday. This was not a workday where anyone painted, cleaned, or landscaped. It was a Saturday where all those interested in starting the school gathered in the conference room in the Administration Building and spent hours hashing out school policy. When and where would the school meet? How would the school's board be constituted? Would the school's board be accountable to the session? Would the school have a dress code? Who would run the school? Who would teach at the school? All of this was debated and eventually decided during the spring of 2006, and Tim was right there at every meeting, often opposing the





*Riverwood Classical School*

idea of the dress code that he now appreciates when getting the kids ready for school in the morning, but listening to arguments, considering other views, and ultimately coming to a consensus. Tim even “took one for the team” by being interviewed about the school and church, then being grossly misquoted, in the local newspaper.

During the second year of the school, when the student body jumped to six students, Tim became a regular presence at RCS. In the mornings, Tim delivered devotionals. In the afternoons, Tim taught art. In between, Tim substituted, ministered to students (and sometimes teachers) whose hearts wanted nothing more than to disobey, and provided general encouragement to us all. In the evenings, Tim continued to serve on the school board. Melissa, too, stepped in to substitute, even to the extent of taking over for an entire week while I headed off to Japan with my husband on a business trip.

Tim continued to deliver devotionals regularly on Friday mornings at RCS for several years.

This may not seem unusual for a pastor whose church has a school, but Tim’s devotionals were anything but usual. The excitement was always palpable, albeit through sleepy yawns, on Friday mornings--what would Mr. Lien come up with next...? There was the impossible long jump. There was the very popular and recurring epic of those scoundrels Shimshaw and Remington. There were stories about “little lambie” that previewed many a Leviticus sermon. Always, though, there was much student participation in what seemed a not-very-Biblical-endeavor at first blush but inevitably demonstrated to the surprised students the fact that the Bible did and does have very much to do with the events of their everyday lives and actions.

Although nothing could eclipse Tim’s devotionals in the students’ eyes, his Friday art classes were also eagerly anticipated. If given the chance, ask Brianna, Hannah, Olivia, Caleb, Joshua, or Sarah if they remember the Rule of Thirds. Hopefully, they will. If not, ask them if they remember their Etruscan tomb painting. They will. They will remember lying on the paper in the parking lot and tracing themselves,




making motifs along the edges, then eventually hanging the large sheets of heavy paper – so large that when put all together they completely covered the folding wall between the upstairs classrooms – and they will remember painting the sheets of paper while standing on folding metal chairs, some of which may still bear some errant paint splatters. They should also remember lying on the ground so that Melissa could take a picture of the six of them looking up at her that I treasure in my office every school day. They might even remember doing the painting of Mt. Vesuvius that hangs over my kitchen sink!

Tim did eventually turn the art classes over to Melissa, who had been helping him anyway, and after a long while turned over his Friday morning devotionals to Dr. Thornton. Tim also eventually rolled off the school board, but he still remained involved at RCS. He continued to substitute when asked. He continued to help Melissa with the art classes from time to time. And, much to the great delight of the oldest class, he took up the teaching of Logic, first informal then formal. Much to everyone's delight, as well, Melissa continued teaching art classes through 2013 and, very reliably and with great talent, served as the school photographer, formal and informal. She put together each of the yearbooks and sent out many an email announcement, even through the end of this school year.

As much as we are so grateful for Tim and Melissa's contributions to the running of the school – and they have been many, contributed with great energy and much artistry – Tim and Melissa's real adventure, and the one that they have shared with other RCS parents, has been

entrusting their precious children to RCS and asking an untested ministry to assist them in the Christian and classical education of those children. As Christians, we should be acutely aware that the only thing that is sure in this world is God's love for his people, as evidenced by the sacrifice of His Son for our righteousness. However, when it comes to our children, we as Christians, are most surely tested; we want only what is proven to be the very best for our little ones. Tim and Melissa stepped out with faith, faith in a method neither had experienced themselves, faith in fellow Christians who would certainly fall short, and faith in the Holy Spirit to lead and direct a grand adventure to the glory of God.

We at RCS hope and pray that this endeavor, this grand adventure, is being used by God for His own glory. Those of us staying at RCS know that God has used the Liens' presence and involvement in RCS for His own glory. We know this because He has so generously let us see the gospel more clearly through Tim's teaching. We know this because of the grace we have seen reflected in Melissa's generosity of time and talent with RCS's students. We know this because of the intellectual development coupled with growth in Christ that we have seen in Laurian and Anderson. We know this from watching Lainey begin ballet and from seeing Jameson's smiles. Mostly, though, we know this because God is faithful to keep His promises to His people. Because God is faithful, we know that the Liens' next grand adventure will be used by God for His glory as well; and we can't wait to see how! 

*Kimberly Staggs is the principal of Riverwood Classical School and is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church.*

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on the pictures just to cause trouble. She has allowed me to be silly with her and laugh over antics within our families. We've shared a love of music (Avett Brothers, Mumford and Sons, just to name a few), but we also share deeper thoughts with each other, like the thoughts on relationship above. She has seen sin in me, and I have seen sin in her, and we gently encourage each other and admonish each other when we need it. We have also developed friendships with each other's children and we've had opportunities to love them and treat them like real people, not just family appendages. She has been my emergency contact on my daughters' school forms for years. Those of you that are parents know how important of a responsibility *that* is.

As they prepare for their imminent move to

California, I'm struggling with a deep sense of loss, yet I know my friendship with Melissa has been fulfilling and God-ordained – really,

it's been a gift. She told me recently that she never expected to be a pastor's wife. Yet, that's what she is. She said she would never live in California. Yet, that's what she is doing. God's call is inexplicable. And I'm sure that she fought it, just like I know that I do at times. What I know is that as she and Tim follow God's call, God will use her in spite of herself, and because of herself too; her ability and aptitude for friendship will allow her to be in fruitful, loving relationships within a new covenant community. What a blessing that will be after leaving everything that is known and familiar! But I will miss her friendship deeply. I know that the words from Proverbs 20:6 (NLT) are so true: "Many will say they are loyal friends, but who can find one who is truly reliable?" I comfort myself with Anne Shirley's words: "True friends are always together in spirit." ¶

*Prathima Ryali-Hancock is the associate editor of the Salt & Light and is a member of Riverwood Presbyterian Church.*

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*Continued from page 6*

woman, made them His own, and brought them together to be one. He blessed them with a family, each child as wonderful and unique as the snowflakes. His plan brought them to Tuscaloosa and Riverwood for the last decade, where they "cut their teeth" on the pastorate. I got to watch all that, and I plan to keep on watching this story unfold. Thanks to technology, it won't be as hard as it once might have been.

And so, blessings, Liens. Thank you, Tim. Thank you, Melissa. Thank you, Laurian, Anderson, Lainey and Jameson. You've given much, and we are the richer. May God hover over you all the way. ¶

*Peggy Drinkard is the Children's Director at Riverwood Presbyterian Church. You may contact her at [pdrinkard@riverwoodchurch.org](mailto:pdrinkard@riverwoodchurch.org).*

# FINALE

## The Preacher

I have an extravagant view of the Preacher. What a wonder it must be to be called, and unable to escape the Call, to be the voice of God and His Word to the very body of Christ. What reserves of humility, love, patience, and self-abnegation must be developed and what discipline must be employed to follow this course ultimately not chosen by oneself but by God. None of this seems natural to me. Like the Sermon on the Mount it all runs against the grain, contrary to the state of man and his instincts and impulses, but speaks of a higher calling, a greater requirement. Obviously, the Preacher lives with the hand of God constantly on him.

Of all the Preachers I've sat under, I think I've been more aware of the blessings and requirements of this noblest of all professions with Tim Lien than the others. Obviously, I have been closer to Tim, but I think also that he seems to...I'm searching for the right word...

maybe he *strives* more with both blessings and requirements than others. Tim understands sin and grace in a profound way, a statement that is not a surprise to those who hear him preach. In understanding sin, he grapples with his sin, not as it opposes grace; Tim truly believes that the Grace we are given is greater than any sin, but as it opposes his requirements. Looking back on his time here at Riverwood, I believe this striving gives his preaching and his ministry a realism, an edge, and a poignancy not often found.

As I considered the Finale to the remembrance and celebration of the Liens' time at Riverwood, I remembered a passage regarding preaching and the pulpit in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, of all places. The scene is New Bedford, Massachusetts, the center of the whaling industry in the early 19th Century. The narrator is one Ishmael, who is looking for a whaler





to sign on for a voyage. During an ice storm, he wanders into the Whaleman's Chapel, something he says most sailors about to leave on voyages do. He observes the chapel and the pulpit. It is high, as pulpits were in those days, but here it is compared to the prow of a ship. There is a rope ladder, made of red wool, which the Preacher, Father Mapple, uses to climb up to the pulpit, and when he gets there, he pulls the ladder up after him and he begins to preach on Jonah, of course. During the sermon, he depicts Jonah as a Preacher sent, but who refuses the Call. He describes himself as "an anointed pilot-prophet or speaker of true things" of the living God. His duty is to "preach the truth to the face of falsehood." He then lists, Moses-like, the "woes" of ignoring the Call of God and the "delights" in fulfilling it. He ends with this statement:

***Delight – top-gallant delight, is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven.***

This is Tim, whose calling is high and who is obedient to fulfill it. He goes to another pulpit; he has been faithful to this one, and will be faithful to that high calling. As Melville says:

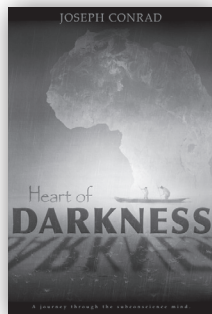
***What could be more full of meaning? --- for the pulpit is ever this world's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit's is its prow.***



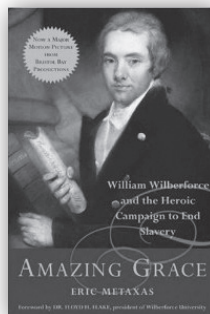


# INTERACT WITH CULTURE

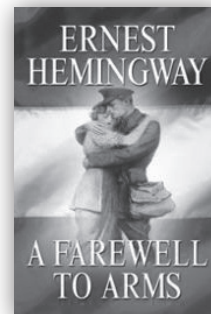
## RIVERWOOD BOOK GROUP



**Heart of Darkness**  
Joseph Conrad



**Amazing Grace**  
Eric Metaxas



**A Farewell To Arms**  
Ernest Hemingway

The Riverwood Book Group meets each Monday evening at 7:30 PM in the home of Kay Kirkley, at 1745 Ridgemont Drive. We select the books we will read together, an eclectic combination of fiction, history, theology, biography, commentary and drama, then we meet to look at them through the lens of the Gospel, "sharpening each other" through discussion. If you enjoy books, ideas, fellowship, and coffee, join us. Everyone is welcome.



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