



DEATH ANNOUNCEMENT

Thomas Randle Mason

April 9, 1939 – October 28, 2023

Tending Wheat to Tending Sheep

Tom Mason didn't take a traditional approach to pursuing his career in the ministry. He was ordained in the Churches of Christ in Australia (Disciples of Christ) after spending his early adult years farming wheat in Horsham, Victoria. Bad hay fever was probably not the only factor in his decision to leave farming and enter the ministry. Tom met his wife of 63 years, Betty Abbott, at a Horsham church group. Growing wheat vs. growing romance? No contest. In the end, the church group (not Betty, but maybe both?) was instrumental in inspiring Tom to pursue his career as a pastor.

After permanently parking his tractor, Tom immersed himself in his seminary studies at the College of the Bible in Glen Iris, Victoria. Upon graduating in 1963, he began his career in church ministry in Mt. Gambier, South Australia. While serving a congregation in Colonel Light Gardens in the late 1960s, he attended the Churches of Christ annual conference and met W.B. Blakemore, Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School. Dean Blakemore invited him to come to the United States and pursue a Master of Divinity in Chicago.

Tom took a figurative, if not literal, leap of faith and accepted the offer. In December 1971, the family of four packed up the bare essentials (unfortunately, not heavy winter coats) into shipping crates, left a Southern Hemisphere summer, and moved halfway around the world to Douglas, a small town in West Michigan. Needless to say, culture shock was no match for the shock (and awe) of Michigan winters. Tom settled into a routine of attending class during the week in Chicago and driving back to Douglas to his family and part-time ministry on the weekends.

What was to be a brief two-year sojourn in the United States stretched to almost 52 years. It included an M.Div. at the University of Chicago followed by a dalliance with a Doctorate in Divinity. As a minister in the United States, the United Church of Christ (UCC) was a better fit theologically and Tom sought out local congregations. Over the course of his career, Tom worked his way up the West Michigan coastline, serving Douglas Congregational UCC in Douglas (1972-1982), Hudsonville Congregational UCC in Hudsonville (1982-1991), and First Congregational Church UCC in Muskegon (1991-2001). In the 10 years he spent with each congregation, he delighted in connecting with members of all ages and walking alongside them on their spiritual journeys. Church members over the years remarked on his insightful

(sometimes inciteful?) and thought-provoking sermons, his generous presence when providing pastoral care, and his leadership on social justice issues and fiscal stewardship. Not surprisingly, his farming know-how came in handy on many occasions for both minor repairs and major church construction projects, as well as youth group mission trips. Hats off to his unorthodox approach to career development.

Tom was passionate about traveling and capturing beautiful scenery in photos. His favorite mode of transportation was by car. Passengers knew the drill. When something worthy of his extensive Kodachrome slide collection caught his eye, he would pull over, jump out and walk until he could frame the shot just so. Passengers were often recruited to pose for scale and a splash of color. Then there was the thrill of loading the slide carousel and revisiting those stunning views in a darkened room, the play of projected light and color of past adventures flickering across the big screen. One of his greatest frustrations after his strokes was losing his ability to drive and the freedom to explore by taking to the open road.

Summers would not pass without a vacation. Aided by AAA guidebooks, TripTiks and maps and Betty riding shotgun as the navigator, the family went on epic road trips with a detailed itinerary down to the mile and an even tighter budget. Some trips covered thousands of miles with (what felt like) stops at every tourist destination along the way. Overseas adventures involved planes, trains, boats and, yes, more driving. Amazing to imagine now, but most trips were planned before the internet age, a testament to Tom's research and planning skills. Later in life, Tom left much of the international travel planning to others but regularly embarked on snow-bird road trips to escape Michigan's winter. Together, he and Betty tallied nearly 30 countries on 6 continents and many U.S. national parks.

Tom was an avid follower of politics. His lack of citizenship in the early years did not prevent him from acting on his convictions and encouraging others to join him. Realizing that their growing family would be U.S.-based, he and Betty took the oath and became naturalized U.S. citizens in 1996. Even so, Tom remained a fair dinkum Aussie at heart, enthusiastically belting out a verse of *Waltzing Matilda* with little provocation, even in his final years. To indulge his interest in history, he joined a Muskegon-based history club. It offered him the opportunity to research and present on a wide range of topics of interest—the Civil War, Charles Darwin and evolution, the Hittites—and add quite a few travel destinations to his bucket list.

Whether it was his farming experience, being of a certain generation, or out of financial necessity, Tom had a knack for taking things apart and getting them back together in working order. He was Mr. Fix-It. Clothes dryers, 10-speed bicycles, toys that lasted less time than it took him to assemble them – all were tackled with confidence and care and the occasional colorful Australian phrase of exasperation. And all without the benefit of YouTube videos! He also enjoyed gardening, tending vegetables in the early years and roses in his later years, and preventing the deer, rabbits and birds from laying waste to his hard work.

Last but not least, Tom enjoyed watching his family grow. He took great joy in getting down on the floor, horsing around (often as the horse!) with his children and his grandchildren. He delighted in celebrating their accomplishments and the milestones in their lives. And he enjoyed sharing his love of travel with them, even when they failed to respond in kind from the backseat. Tom was also pleased to connect with extended family members in Australia who were unknown to him until an error in genealogical research was brought to light about 20 years ago.

Tom was born to Frederick Ballantyne Mason and Lillias Emily Vice in Melbourne, Victoria on April 9, 1939. He attended Coburg High School in Melbourne, College of the Bible in Glen Iris, and the University of Chicago Divinity School in Chicago. Tom died on October 28, 2023 after a long cognitive and physical decline due to strokes. Tom is survived by his wife, Betty, his children, Andrew Mason (Jennifer) and Susanne Mason (Jon Jacobs), five grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. Tom is also survived by his brother, Fred Mason (Pam), and their three children who reside in Brisbane, Queensland.

A memorial service is not planned at this time. A plaque in his memory will be placed in the Meditation & Memorial Garden at Douglas Congregational UCC in Summer 2024. The family invites you to visit in the Michigan summer (unless you're partial to cold and snow). And Tom would encourage you to indulge in one of his favorite treats, a vanilla ice cream cone.