

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES

SPRING 2025



VOICES





A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT REV. DR. MOLLY T. MARSHALL

Dear Faithful Friends of United,

On a resplendent Sunday in late April, we gathered with United’s class of 2025, their families and friends, along with faculty, staff, and Trustees to confer dozens of well-earned degrees and bestow on them the title of alum. Our 63rd Commencement was an occasion for rapturous joy and audacious hope, and I charged each graduate with the task of transformation: to be active, public witnesses for justice, peace, and the common good. Students and alums are the very embodiment of our mission, living witnesses to the importance of theological education, and I am resolutely convinced that United has equipped them for such a time as this.

A common refrain of mine is that United is not interested in prescribing our students answers to every question. Rather, we teach them to ask better questions. It is one thing to ask what is true, but in this “post-truth” age, where reality fades like a mirage on the horizon, it is far more important—and increasingly difficult—to discern how we know what is true. We see too often how the powerful cavalierly bend or redefine “truth” to deny the realities of human experience, diversity, and dignity. This epoch of epistemological erosion demands our stalwart response.

Since the fall of 2024, Public Witness for the Common Good, a phrase inscribed in United’s core values, has been our through-line. In this new season, our progressive Christian seminary must also find inspiration in the tradition of the prophets, those ancient (and modern) truth-tellers who risked life, relationships, and reputation to speak against injustice.

United, through its students and alums, past and present, is also a Prophetic Witness for the Common Good. We insist on asking better questions, and we do so hand-in-hand, sharing the values of our inherent dignity, self-evident diversity, and multivalent experiences. We refuse to shy away from the truth.

Yet, we don’t do this alone: It is the prayerful support and faithful giving of friends like you sustain our mission and empower our convictions in the tumult of our time. In the pages ahead, I hope you will be likewise inspired by the testimony of students, alums, and donors whose prophetic witnesses are already bearing transformative fruit.

With thanks,

Molly T. Marshall

Rev. Molly T. Marshall, PhD
President

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ARTIST PROFILE — DAWN CARLSON CONN ('97, '17)

Dawn Carlson Conn (M.Div., '97; Certificate in Arts & Spirituality, '17) created the 3x8-foot piece on the VOICES cover several years ago when her Fiber Artists Group each created a piece the same size in their particular textile genre. The variety was amazing and hung proudly on the two-story wall of the Burnsville Art Center.

Water remains Dawn’s favorite spiritual focus as she reflects on the waters of creation, birth, and baptism. This piece, “Reflections,” brought to her mind sunrise and sunset, rippling water or a waterfall, as well as the ongoing cycle of life itself. Each white square of fabric was stitched, painted, cut apart, and then sewn together. It was, she says, a “labor of artful love!”

TRUTH AND TRANSFORMATION: UNITED'S 63RD COMMENCEMENT AND THE CLASS OF 2025



Dozens of graduates, their families and friends, faculty, and the United community gathered on April 27 for United's 63rd Commencement Exercises. Graciously hosted by Plymouth Congregational Church, it was—true to the ethos of our seminary—a transformative experience.

Commencement was anchored by an address from Rev. Dr. John J. Thatamanil, Professor of Theology and World Religions and Director of the Insight Project at Union Theological Seminary in New York. A close friend and former professor of Dr. Demian Wheeler, Dr. Thatamanil's address was titled "Desiring Truth: A Pedagogy of the Heart for the Post-Truth Era." Directly naming the realities of this social and political moment, he opened by urging his listeners to find every occasion for joy. "Joy is a fortification for future labor, including the labor of resistance," he said. In his thesis, he asserted, "We cannot possibly inform our way out of our present crisis. What is needed is *transformation*, not information."

In addition to the conferral of degrees, special honor was given to Frank L. Sims. United's faculty and board awarded him a Doctor of Humane Letters (*honoris causa*) in recognition of his decades of service, stalwart commitment to theological education, and his innovative support for United's students. You can read more about Frank on page 6.

We give thanks for this auspicious occasion, the achievements of our graduates, and all who made this possible.

Photos by Michele Jokinen and Nathaniel Green.

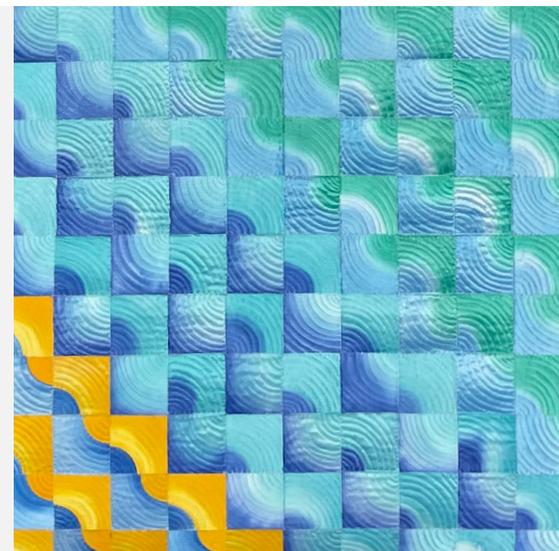


A Commissioned Minister of Liturgical Art at Robbinsdale Parkway UCC (where the photo was taken), Dawn has been a member for 45 years and has served there for many years, creating meaningful visuals. A lifelong artist, Dawn came to understand and experience her work in a new way while at United.

She realized that images were sermons, art materials could become conveyors of the Holy, formation could happen while painting, and being surrounded by visual proclamation helped the congregation to more deeply participate in worship. This learning shaped

her voice as a minister. And it was this voice that she used to lead the congregation in Robbinsdale. Her "trinity of mentors" included Madeleine Sue Seid-Martin, Rev. Dr. Carolyn Pressler, and Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson. Each one is a true gift.

"Whether inviting members to participate in an arts experience, installing visual proclamation, leading worship, or assisting in worship planning," Dawn notes that she "attempts to bring the arts to the table in ways that have had a significant impact on the life and vitality of this congregation."





AT UNITED, KATERI BOUCHER IS INSPIRED TO CHASE HER CHILDHOOD DREAMS

by Diane Riggs

Kateri Boucher, who is pursuing an MDiv in Church Leadership, felt a call to ministry very early. “I was three when I told my mom I wanted to be a priest,” she recalls. She adds, “I would preach homilies and make [my mom] write them down.” Raised in Upstate New York, Kateri’s family attended a progressive Catholic church untethered from Roman Catholic strictures. Watching a woman priest serve communion sparked her pronouncement.

Years later, after attending a liberal arts college, Kateri jumped at a chance to work on an “urban agriculture” project in Detroit. The community she found through the Catholic Worker and an Episcopal church rekindled her sense of calling, so she moved there. Now, at United, Kateri is making her dreams a reality.

SEARCHING FOR A SEMINARY

About four years ago, Kateri began searching for a seminary. She researched a few schools, but realized she didn’t want to leave Detroit. She had just been hired at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church and hoped to continue that work. Sarah Holst (’20) recommended United.

The more she learned about United, the more it seemed like the best choice. “I wouldn’t have to sacrifice what I [wanted] to do an online program,” she remembers thinking, “and it would allow me to stay rooted in Detroit and...work at St. Peter’s.”

TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHERS

During her first semester at United, Kateri took two classes with Rev. Dr. Andrew Packman, assistant professor of Theological Ethics and Formation. Class

assignments and interactions, Kateri notes, really opened her mind to ways in which theology has evolved. “It is such a gift,” she declares, “to get to study with someone for whom teaching is so clearly a vocational call. I’ve rarely interacted with someone who has such a sharp mind and such a generous spirit.”

Dr. Jennifer Maidrand—visiting assistant professor of Bible, Culture, and Interpretation, supported by the Louisville Institute—taught courses that Kateri took recently. A guest poet in the Hebrew Bible class was a “really cool” highlight. And, in the Bible and Palestine-Israel class, Kateri asserts that Dr. Maidrand “led us so gracefully through really challenging conversations throughout the semester [and] basically every...assignment for this class is something applicable to the real world.”

Rev. Dr. DeWayne Davis, Kateri’s preaching professor, created another memorable experience. “His passion [for preaching],” she quips, “was palpable from miles away over a Zoom screen! He really brought it to life and held us in a beautiful way.” Through the class, Kateri notes that she learned strategies for

telling “compelling stories.” She can use that at St. Peter’s, when she preaches each month.

DISTANCE LEARNING

Because she wanted to balance her part-time work at St. Peter’s, service projects, and seminary, Kateri sincerely appreciates United’s distance learning program. “I remember telling people in my first semester that it’s clear that this school didn’t just start doing online classes during COVID;” they’ve had years “honing the art of hybrid classes.”

She’s also made a lot of seminary friends. It’s so easy, Kateri shares, to message someone and say, “Hey, do you want to connect out of class?” The chat feature in Zoom also makes the in-class learning process more interactive.

FORMULATING A FUTURE

Kateri describes another support from United, the Dayton Scholarship, as a “total blessing and game changer.” The funding, she reveals, “has enabled me to keep working... at St. Peter’s and participate in the church’s service outreach programs.” She’s hoping to add a second MA, made possible by the scholarship.

As she looks ahead, Kateri knows changes will come. She’s started ordination and will leave St. Peter’s for a new call. In the United community, she sees “a real beauty, that we are scattered like seeds around the country and the world,” asking key questions. Still, she admits, “it was nourishing to come to United for Symposium Week; it “helped me to feel more rooted in the community.” In sum, Kateri exclaims, “I just love United so much! I’m so grateful it exists.”



TENURE AND SABBATICALS: CAUSES FOR CELEBRATION

by Diane Riggs

During United’s 63rd Commencement on April 27, Dean Kyle Roberts shared some newsworthy academic announcements. He led with a tribute to a newly tenured faculty member, and ended with details about faculty sabbaticals and a new acting Dean starting June 1.

Kyle, who likened tenuring faculty to an “academic wedding,” illuminated the excellence that inspired United to award tenure to Rev. Dr. Sabia-Tanis—McVay Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Social Transformation and program director for Social Transformation—in February. Kyle commended Justin for “his commitment to the craft of teaching, his leadership among his faculty colleagues, [and] his crucially

MARY ANN MURRAY ('76) TREASURES THE RELATIONSHIPS SHE ESTABLISHED AT UNITED

by Diane Riggs

In 1969, when Mary Ann Murray ('76) enrolled at United, America was embroiled in the Vietnam War, and the seminary, which opposed the war, had spent its first seven years led by and attended by men. It was also a residential school, where faculty and students lived on campus and forged a collegial bond.

Along with Rev. Marilyn Creel ('72), Mary Ann was one of the first two women to enroll in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program. Unlike their colleagues, neither lived on campus. Mary Ann was married, with young children, and Marilyn was not allowed to live on campus as a single woman. Still, United afforded Mary Ann opportunities to build community, and it's the relationships, she asserts, that have sustained her enduring connection with United.

CONSIDERING SEMINARY

Though Mary Ann was raised in the American Baptist denomination, she first learned of United at a community church where the pastor also served as an adjunct faculty member at the seminary. At the time, Mary Ann was teaching at the church and felt a strong call to study theology.

In March of 1969, she met with Dean Louis Gunnemann "to discuss my options for studying theology." United offered a certificate in Christian education and the MDiv, so Mary Ann resolved to begin the degree in the fall. "I couldn't wait to begin my seminary career," she remembers telling her pastor, and she

important and cutting-edge scholarship in gender justice and sexual ethics."

Kyle also praised Justin's dedication to his students and broader participation in the life of United as director of the Social Transformation program and faculty advisor to the Leadership Center for Social Justice. "In addition," Kyle concluded, "Justin's public voice and presence in protests for trans rights and gender justice, racial justice, and other issues, are crucially important...demonstrating and living out United's core values in the world."

wanted to read every book in the library. He loaned Mary Ann his copy of Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, and said, "Theological education isn't about reading books; it is about relationships."

UNITED HIGHLIGHTS

This spring marks the 50th anniversary of her graduation from United, and Mary Ann still remembers key elements of her experience. For example, she notes that faculty members did not have posted office hours. "A blessing I took for granted," she reflects, "was the availability of faculty; I remember many robust conversations with professors over coffee in the refectory."

She also vividly remembers the first session in her Christian Ethics course. "We were asked to describe how we made an ethical decision. By the end of the term, we each had expanded that initial statement and honed our own ethics method."

In September of 1971, Mary Ann, Tracy Godfrey, and two students from Luther Northwestern Seminary entered the first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at what was then Hennepin County General Hospital (now HCMC). At the hospital, Mary Ann was the first woman in the chaplain's CPE units.

Dean Gunnemann's words at Spring Convocation 1972 created one of her most moving memories. "The relationships in our lives that are truly redeeming," Dean Gunnemann advised, "are grounded in gratitude."

On a related note, Kyle reported that he and two faculty members will be taking sabbaticals over the next year. Justin will be on sabbatical in the fall term, and Rev. Dr. Gary F. Green II, associate professor of Pastoral Theology and Social Transformation and director of Anti-racist Initiatives, will be on sabbatical next spring. And Kyle, at the urging of President Marshall and other faculty members, will step away on sabbatical this summer and fall.

While Kyle is gone, Dr. Demian Wheeler, the Sophia Associate Professor of Religious and



Mary Ann at her 25th Graduation Anniversary

ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

"My commitment and loyalty to United are grounded in gratitude for the relationships from my time at United, which have bridged the years and enriched my life." Mary Ann is pleased to support United's mission to provide transformative theological education to equip students to make a difference in the world through their unique ministries. She makes this possible as a generous donor who is a member of the Barnabas, Bossard-Ward, and Joshua Societies.

"Theological education," Mary Ann observes, "is a lens through which we see the world and how to respond to it." For her devotion to relationships at United and for sharing her story, we are deeply grateful to observe this 50th anniversary of Mary Ann's graduation.

Theological Studies and director of Advanced Studies, will serve as acting dean. "Say a special prayer for Dr. Demian Wheeler," adjured Kyle before this announcement. Heartiest congratulations to Justin on the occasion of his tenure, and many blessings to faculty members during their sabbatical leaves.



HELPING OTHERS: THE IMPACT OF FRANK SIMS

by Nathaniel Green

“We were put on earth to help one another.” From a young age, Frank Sims’ mother instilled this message in her children, urging them to love their neighbors by getting involved and giving back. A business person, educator, and philanthropist, he is guided by the question, “What can you do to help uplift others?”

Frank’s connection to and involvement with United originated in an unlikely place: corporate America. He moved to the Twin Cities region in the 1970s for a position with Cargill, Inc., an international agricultural company based in Minnetonka, MN, where he became corporate vice president. It was while at Cargill in the 1990s that he met Dr. Kita McVay (’96, ’09), a member of United’s Board of Trustees, who invited him to join the board. He eagerly accepted the invitation after meeting with President Ben Griffin, establishing an expansive relationship with the seminary that has thrived for over 30 years.

Success at Cargill allowed Frank to orient his life toward education, a passion that complemented his core values and personal experiences. In addition to his involvement

with United, Frank, who now lives in Atlanta, has served as Board Chair and Interim President of Fisk University, a Historically Black College and University based in Nashville. “I don’t think there’s anything more important than education,” Frank avows. “When we deprive students of that opportunity, I think it’s a disservice. Any time my wife and I can, we do something to help in that way.”

In the realm of theological education, Frank believes United stands out. “There is what I would call an underpinning understanding of the value of diversity that’s not only instilled in the students at United, but constantly supported throughout their education. They leave United with a better understanding, but also a willingness to be a voice for those values.”

These convictions, coupled with a lifelong admiration for seminary instructors, laid the groundwork for Frank’s commitment to student support at United. “It is so difficult to finance an education, and this is especially true for first-generation scholars,” Frank says. Seeking to address those imminent needs, Frank and his wife, Robyn, endowed a scholarship in 2013 that has provided support to students for over a decade. More recently, their giving evolved in 2024 to become the Sims Scholars Initiative.

Designed to educate and equip leaders to constructively engage issues confronting Black spiritual communities, the Initiative provides intra-program mentorship and a tailored, tuition-free Master of Arts in Leadership degree to a select cohort of students. Received with enthusiasm by students and

faculty alike, the inaugural cohort began in the fall of 2024. The second is slated to start this fall, and it will be the first to engage students outside the Twin Cities.

Frank and Robyn’s impact is deeply felt. In an essay written for members of United’s Lydia Society, Sims Scholar Elwyn Young poignantly reflects, “Since I entered United, . . . I have had five professors, and each of them has made themselves available with knowledge, patience, and understanding, giving a feeling that they desire us all to succeed. Without this Sims Scholar Initiative, I would not have had the opportunity to experience such richness.”

At last month’s Commencement ceremony, Frank was honored for his community leadership, service, and stalwart support for theological education with a Doctor of Humane Letters (*honoris causa*). As President Molly T. Marshall remarked, “Over the years, Frank Sims has demonstrated his care for theological education and the church through providing generous scholarship assistance to United.... He has contributed greatly to higher education and, particularly, to this good school.” United gives thanks for this visionary advocate whose impact on theological education spans generations.



REMEMBERING MAE VOLLBRECHT

by Diane Riggs

United mourns the passing of Mae Vollbrecht, a devoted United staff member from 1979–2003, who passed away on February 28, 2025, just a few weeks short of her 97th birthday.

During her time at United, Mae oversaw many tasks. She processed gifts, produced

thank-you letters, provided hospitality, maintained donor records, produced donor mailings, pulled reports, and assisted with donor events.

Mae started when donor records were all paper and helped United move into a new computer system. She also helped the seminary establish development department initiatives, trained new

A MESSAGE FROM ADVANCEMENT

REV. DR. CINDI BETH JOHNSON

Dear Friend of United,

When Rev. Dr. Wayne Schupbach[†] ('66, '72) visited United's St. Paul campus in the summer of 2023, he was intentional about what he wanted to see, particularly the classrooms, the library, and the gathering spaces. He wanted to hear about the curriculum, and he wanted to meet President Molly T. Marshall. He reminisced about former professors but also asked informed questions, eager to understand what it was like to be a student today.

As is often the case, as we walked around, he talked about his experience as a student, mentioning beloved faculty members who mentored him. He talked about what they were learning at the time and the types of assignments they had, and he remembered fellow classmates fondly, speaking of their lifelong connection.

After graduation, Wayne served United Church of Christ (UCC) congregations in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas for more than 40 years. Wayne's commitments to social justice ran deep and accompanied him on each leg of his journey. His family described him as someone who "cared deeply, loved generously, and with others, hoped extravagantly."

Over the years, Wayne and his late wife Harriet came back to campus for reunions, events, and other programs. Their connection to United and its mission was deeply rooted. Wayne and Harriet were lifelong, faithful

** indicates those of blessed memory*

development staff, supported United's mission, and always modeled kindness and compassion.

Mae joined United during Rev. Dr. Dayton Hultgren's presidency, and they first worked at his Minneapolis office. Later, they used one of the seminary apartments as their office. She retired while Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates was president.

Former faculty member Sue Ebberts ('78), Professor Emerita of Theological Bibliography (1995–2016), reflects, "Mae was a gift to UTS,

supporters of United's mission. His first gift came in December of 1966, just five months after he graduated, and those faithful gifts continued for 51 years.

Wayne made that last trip to United's St. Paul campus accompanied by his son, Lance. At the time, he was dealing with a serious illness that was in remission. The trip felt a bit like a pilgrimage. In our conversations, he talked about his giving and his commitment to United. He summarized the conversation by stating, "I want to give because I hope the seminary will be around for a long time."

People like Wayne, along with other alums and friends, support United's mission, helping us prepare innovative and compassionate

**I WANT TO GIVE
BECAUSE I HOPE
THE SEMINARY
WILL BE AROUND
FOR A long time.**

**Rev. Dr. Wayne
Schupbach[†] ('66, '72)**

Wayne died in February of 2025, but his gifts continued. As a way to extend his gratitude for United, he asked that memorials be sent to United. In the months since Wayne's death, we have received numerous gifts

and a joy to be around. I have fond memories of lunches out with Mae and Marian Hoeft at restaurants that no longer exist. [United] owes much to these women and many others who worked largely behind the scenes and above and beyond their 'pay grades' to keep things running as smoothly as possible."

"Mae was a delight!" exclaims former faculty member Jean Morris Trumbauer. "She helped out in the DMin office for several months, and working with Mae was always a privilege. Her smile would melt anyone." Rev. Norman Pavey



from family members, alums, and friends. His faithful support in life persisted in death, and it is because of the extravagant hope and generosity of alums like Wayne that we are able to continue this good work.

Gratefully,

Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson
Vice President for Advancement

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with a legacy gift.**

To learn more, contact Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson at 651-255-6137 or cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu.

('69, '74, '84) adds, "I remember Mae with great fondness. She was very kind and had a great smile."

Donna Zigas, a former executive assistant at United, recalls, "Mae was my first friend at [United] and was a good friend to me and my husband Jack. She was a wonderful, kind, compassionate person, and I will miss her very much."

Blessed be the memory of Mae Rose Vollbrecht.

STAY CONNECTED

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by Nathaniel Green

Faith communities have long struggled to reach consensus on the inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people. Debates in congregations and conferences have led to harmful statements, schisms, and highlighted sharp disagreements over theology, ethics, and justice. Of course, these are never merely debates, never just “disagreements;” these are questions of fundamental rights, theology, one’s sense of self, and what it means to love.

** indicates those of blessed memory*

50 YEARS LATER—THE IMPACT OF JIM NELSON’S “HOMOSEXUALITY: AN ISSUE FOR THE CHURCH”

Whereas some denominations reject the very existence of LGBTQ+ identities out of hand, others have sought the counsel of their LGBTQ+ members and committed to structural equality and solidarity. Fifty years ago, this shift was happening at United, owing to the advocacy of students, faculty, and a prescient professor’s willingness to articulate a clear theological case for affirmation.

In *United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities: An Ecumenical Venture*, Dr. Arthur L. Merrill^{*} (Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, 1958–1995) recounted the impact of Dr. James B. Nelson’s^{*} (Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics, 1963–1995) paper titled “Homosexuality: An Issue for the Church,” published in the Winter 1975 issue of *Theological Markings*, United’s journal. In it, Nelson identified what he viewed as the four primary theological positions against other sexual orientations, and he graciously engaged each of them while arguing his clear conviction as a Christian ethicist: unequivocal affirmation.

Nelson wrote, “An ethics of the Gospel ought never forget that moral responsibility is intrinsically related to self-acceptance, and that self-acceptance is intrinsically related to acceptance by significant others and, ultimately, by God.” In a section titled “A Personal Note,” Jim posits that acceptance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people might be a source of “augmented liberation” for all, “bringing new possibilities of tenderness, lessened competitiveness, and greater emotional intimacy.”

Just two years later, United’s Faculty Senate adopted a statement affirming “equal educational opportunity for all our students regardless of race, sex, or affectional preference” (sexual orientation). It avowed that “we do not believe that such an orientation in and of itself disqualifies a person from preparing for ministry at this seminary.” Nelson’s progressive theological vision and visionary scholarship continues to impact United, its students, and the communities they lead. For his prophetic witness for the common good, we give thanks.