

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES

WINTER 2025

# VOICES







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

**Dear Friends of United,**

Much has changed in our nation since last I wrote to you in *VOICES*. Civic life, under a new administration, has assumed a decidedly different timbre. This stark metamorphosis requires that we clarify our convictions and embody our values: How can United meet this moment? How does a progressive seminary equip its students to serve congregations, communities, and a society in need of such profound transformation?

Theological education invites us into a deeper understanding of the questions at stake. Writing for *The Christian Century* in January, Rev. Dr. Andrew Packman, United's assistant professor and program director for formation, made a poignant case for the "consolation" of studying theology: "Theological study, if we're doing it right, doesn't avoid the crises of our world. It interrogates them at the deepest level."

In class and conversation, our faculty and the students in their care engage questions wide in scope, deep in meaning, and varied in application. From congregational ministry to intensive care units, United is preparing students for the exigent work of justice and peace. Without the financial assistance provided by scholarships, a transformative theological education would be out of reach for many.

In a stirring conclusion, Andrew reminds his readers "this study of theology thus offers guidance in turbulent times." It provides, he adds, "occasions for flourishing and joy amid the tumult." These are certainly discomfiting days, yet I find myself made joyful—hopeful, even—by what I see happening at United.

Through the stories in this issue, you'll read how a United education manifests in our students' lives and, by extension, the communities they serve. Even facing seemingly intractable societal crises and the theological questions they raise, United has risen to the occasion, just as we've done for 63 years.

We are grateful for your financial support, and I invite you to consider how you might have a direct impact on a student's life with a gift to our scholarship fund.

With thanks,

*Molly T. Marshall*

Rev. Molly T. Marshall, PhD  
President

“  
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ministry to intensive  
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## ARTIST PROFILE — HUGH HUELSTER ('20)

Hugh Huelster ('20) used the photo on the *VOICES* cover for his master of arts in Theology and the Arts thesis because, he says, "it encapsulated my notion of how being surrounded by nature's artistic expression can lead to an exuberant life." The photo features Hugh's grandson at the Store King Arts Center in New Windsor, New York. Titled "The Intersection between Creativity and Spirituality: Why They Matter," Hugh's

thesis explores questions about the personal origins of creative and spiritual expression and their significance in our lives.

A sense of spirit and art have pervaded Hugh's life. He earned a BA in Studio Art from Macalester College and considered becoming a Unitarian minister shortly thereafter. More than 40 years later, he was still thinking about the "intriguing mystery"

# DONORS ESTABLISH THE WILSON YATES CHAIR IN THEOLOGY AND THE ARTS

by Nathaniel Green & Cindi Beth Johnson

United recently announced the newly established Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts. This tenure-track, endowed faculty position will be made possible by gifts from United friends, alums, and former faculty.

Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates, President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religion, Society, and the Arts (1967–2005), has had a storied career and made significant contributions to United, perhaps none more so than in the development of United's work in the field of theology and the arts. Wilson's visionary leadership expanded and deepened the connection between imagination, creativity, and theology as expressed through the arts that has been core to United's academic ethos for decades, evidenced by the art from students and alums lining the walls of United's campus, and anchoring its publications, programs, and digital media.

As a professor, Wilson had a transformative impact on his students' understanding of their art as theology and their theology as art, empowering them to find their creative voices. As Dean, he invited the faculty to explore and expand their understanding of the arts and the critical role that they could play in teaching. As President, he was active in the larger national and international conversations taking place regarding theology and the arts.

In addition to teaching, Wilson has been a prolific speaker, author, and contributor to publications. These include *The Arts in Theological Education: New Possibilities for*

*Integration*, published in 1987; *Art, Theology and the Church*, which he co-edited with Kimberly Vrudny ('95); and *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, which he co-edited with James Luther Adams, his advisor at Harvard. Published in 2009, the book *Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts*—edited by Robin Jensen and Kimberly Vrudny ('95)—was dedicated to Wilson and his legacy: a desire to see the arts as a necessary part of theological education.

In his writings, Wilson identified six key points of intersection between art and theology, including an understanding of the role of the arts in worship; art as a key to understanding Christian history; art as a means of experiencing the human condition; art as a means of encountering the prophetic; art as a form of the sacramental; and art as a source of Christian vision. In his work after retirement, Wilson has continued to teach and write.

Dean Kyle Roberts, Vice President for Academic Affairs, celebrates his predecessor, saying, "One can hardly think of United without also thinking of Theology and the Arts, and vice versa. And one can hardly think of both without also thinking of Wilson Yates. Wilson's academic work and creativity in Theology and the Arts birthed that spirit and focus at United, establishing a unique identity among seminaries. This endowed chair in his name and honor secures that historic identity and legacy for decades to come."

President Molly T. Marshall reflects, "What a joyful project it has been to gather friends of United, Wilson's many friends, to provide



funding for this chair. This endowed chair rightly honors his legacy, and this good school continues his groundbreaking work in theology and the arts, extending it in ever-new directions. We have learned from him that a longing for beauty is akin to a longing for God."

A natural progression of Wilson's vision and leadership, this chair supports, in perpetuity, the centrality of the arts at United as a core pillar of the seminary's educational experience. The United community will soon celebrate the installation of a faculty member into this new Chair. We will share more in the coming months. We offer our deepest gratitude to those many whose gifts will establish the Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts.

There's still time to join these many donors by making a gift to the Yates Chair! Please contact Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson, Vice President for Advancement, at [cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu) to make your contribution and be part of this extraordinary moment.

Read the full announcement and view the list of donors at [bit.ly/yates-chair](https://bit.ly/yates-chair).

of the interplay between art, theology, and life, so he came to United to "scratch that itch."

"My time at United," notes Hugh, "affirmed for me an understanding that the arts, creativity, and spirituality are inextricably intertwined; each are critical components of our psyches. If well nurtured, they can guide us to a life well lived."

Hugh extols Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates, President Emeritus & Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religion, Society, and the Arts (1967–2005), for his role in infusing United with a deep

appreciation for theology and the arts. In *ARTS: The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, a journal he founded in 1988, Yates has written about the "power of art to reveal to us human and holy ways of understanding who we are and the life of the world in which we live."

Hugh also concurs with Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman, associate professor of Theology and the Arts and program director for Theology and the Arts, that the dividing line signified by "theology and the arts" could signal that they

are separate entities. "Art is theology," Hugh asserts instead, "just as theology is art."

"United reinforced my long-held understanding," Hugh concludes, "of the importance of picking up a pencil, a wood chisel, a knitting needle, a lump of clay, or whatever, and creating something. Anything. Let art work. It matters."



## STUDENT REV. ALICIA REESE CREATIVELY MIXES MINISTRY WITH IMPROV

by Diane Riggs

Rev. Alicia Reese has followed the pull of two great loves: theatre and ministry. “I spent most of my life in theatre; I think I started when I was seven,” she recalls. As she grew older, Alicia also felt “a strong call toward ministry,” but there were no women pastors in her church setting. “I never saw,” she reflects, “how that call to ministry could be lived out.”

Through high school and college, Alicia threw herself into theatre. At a small Christian school in Florida, she met a theatre director who believed the arts and church could go together. He let her take over the theatre ministry troupe—“a sketch comedy-ish group that used Christian themes and scripture,” Alicia explains.

In her 20s, after moving to Chicago and working in theatre full-time, Alicia experienced another strong nudge toward ministry. This time she earned an MA in Theological Studies, but had the sinking feeling that she might have to give up theatre. A minister at her church, who recognized her unique gifts, encouraged her to pursue an MDiv.

One of Alicia’s professors at North Park Theological Seminary introduced her to a prison education program at a correctional facility in Joliet. She embraced this new challenge and wanted to help those who were incarcerated to share their stories. “So I pulled out my theatre bag of tricks,” Alicia shares, and considered using improv.

### FINDING UNITED

The success Alicia found using improv to get incarcerated students to re-vision their stories inspired her to go back to school for a DMin through which she could explore the “connection between spiritual formation and improv.” Why United? “From the moment I started interacting with United,” Alicia remarks, “I felt that deep connection between the arts and theology and ministry.”

After meeting with Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman, she was hooked. Jennifer helped Alicia create an independent study that involved taking classes at The Second City in Chicago, “a life-changing” experience. Alicia credits United’s “openness to exploration,” the ability to have both “a classroom and a laboratory,” and the needs-based scholarship she received as keys to her success. In addition, “every professor has made a stamp on my work along the way,” and interactions with other students have been “just as fruitful and formative.”

### REAL-LIFE APPLICATIONS

For Dean Roberts’ class, Alicia “designed a whole Lenten series of spiritual practices that use improv” for her congregation. For

example, one week she asked congregants to practice failure using the “failure bow”—an exuberant, joyous admission of failure that tricks the brain into getting more comfortable with and learning from failure. More recently, she created a similar series for Advent. When the children’s minister asked her to devise something for the children’s pageant, he and Alicia designed an intergenerational service based on joy and improv.

Toward the end of the service, Alicia used an improv game called “Slide Show” to help the children tell the story of Jesus’ birth. For the first slide, Alicia shared a piece of the birth narrative, and the kids acted out the scene on stage. On alternate slides, the children acted out another piece of the story, and Alicia had to explain what they were doing. Along the way, the kids added new characters and became very engaged in the storytelling.

The pageant, Alicia exclaims, was “probably one of the most joyful, wonderful experiences I’ve had in a faith community, ever.” It was also a reminder of how the DMin work is spilling over into her ministry.

This is “a full-circle moment,” Alicia declares. The gift of “bringing art back into my life through my ministry work has felt like I’m living into the fullness of who God really called me to be now.”



## REMEMBERING REV. DR. ROBERT (BOB) BRYANT

Hired by Mission House in 1961, Rev. Dr. Robert (Bob) Bryant, Professor Emeritus of Constructive Theology (1961–1991), was instrumental in supporting the fledgling United as it developed an ethos for justice. In his 30-year tenure, Bob served twice as a trustee, developed curricula for 12 Native American students, published articles and books, and taught his sabbatical year in South Africa.

President Emeritus Wilson Yates asserts, “He had a great influence on students and gave them a breadth of theological options in the Modern Christian World. Bob made a significant contribution to the development of United.” President Molly T. Marshall contends, “Rev. Dr. Bryant brought erudition and broad learning to the fledgling seminary,

and our current faculty extends his legacy.”

As we observe the passing of an influential United faculty member at the age of 99, we honor the blessed memory of Bob Bryant and give thanks for all of the ways he mentored, taught, and inspired students at United, and supported justice-leaning causes.

Read more at [bit.ly/bob-bryant](https://bit.ly/bob-bryant).



## REV. A. LEON TREDWELL, PHD ('06) PUBLISHES GOOD NEWS IN HIS NEW BOOK

by Diane Riggs

Rev. A. Leon Tredwell, PhD ('06) realized his spiritual calling at age 10. "I came up in the church," he explains, at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia—a Black church wrestling with the "narrative of civility." At the time, "we were down to one lady (Ms. Walker) who shouted" when she caught the spirit. One Sunday, Lee and his friends were in the back row when someone told the youngsters exactly when Ms. Walker would shout. When the prediction came true, the boys broke into suppressed laughter. That's when Lee heard the Spirit speaking to him.

"Why are you laughing at her?" Lee recalls the voice asking. It continued: "She's only doing that because I've been good to her. And I've been good to you, too." Since Lee's family setting had changed from abject poverty to suburban middle class, he could only agree. The die was cast.

### COMING TO UNITED

Though Lee fully recognized his call to ministry, he began his professional life as a grain trader for Cargill. After 10 years of moving with the company, Lee realized his purpose wasn't being fulfilled.

Through a connection with and encouragement from Rev. Drs. Ralph and Alike Galloway, Lee decided to give United a try. Thinking back, Lee says that the first thing he appreciated about United was that "the environment and the content were inclusive,

innovative, and it was a place of freedom." Because he was wrestling with his sexuality, Lee especially needed that kind of open-arms welcome.

He continues, "To see other queer people who were just brilliant and living out their brilliance in the fullness of who they were" was remarkably affirming. "Being queer in the Black church," he observes, "was an anathema."

He remembers Rev. Dr. Carolyn Pressler and Dean Richard Weis<sup>†</sup> with great affection. Both teachers, he asserts, "taught us to wrestle with the biblical text until it opened up and spoke." They also introduced Lee to Black and post-colonial hermeneutics, and Rev. Dr. Weis led him to passages in Jeremiah 38 (Hebrew Bible) that sparked his interest in learning more about a Black character named Ebed-Melech.

### SPREADING THE GOOD WORD

These days, since earning his PhD in Theological and Religious Studies in 2017, and spending many years preaching and teaching, Lee is excited to be publishing a new book. Titled *Black, Queer, and Blessed: My Story and the Biblical Story Churches Don't Teach*, the book is part memoir and part theological reflection on the Ebed-Melech revelation.

Lee has launched a new website (blackqueerandblessed.com) to promote the book and serve as a touchstone for young people struggling with their faith and sexuality. He is also planning an upcoming



tour, including podcast interviews and speaking engagements at universities and seminaries, to share the good news about "blessings and connectedness with God." "The spirit of God and the energies that God has given us are toward purpose," he asserts.

Reflecting on his time at United, Lee feels gratitude for the openness and creativity he discovered. "I am extremely grateful for the experiences at United and the shaping of my life as a result of being there." He continues, "Because I was there and they embraced me and encouraged me, they helped me to evolve...to be where I am today."

<sup>†</sup> Deceased



## REMEMBERING REV. DR. CLYDE J. STECKEL

In June 1970, Rev. Dr. Clyde J. Steckel, Professor Emeritus of Theology (1970–1995), joined United's faculty as Associate Professor of Theology and Psychology. Originally from Indiana, Clyde earned his BD at Chicago Theological Seminary and his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago. His connection with and myriad contributions to United began

before that appointment, extending far beyond his official retirement.

Dr. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies (1976–2004), reflects, "He lived a deeply ecumenical life by embodying and sharing the best of his own tradition. Clyde was my guide into the history and polity (a word I

learned from Clyde) of the progressive Protestantism that animates United, and he has been my guide into the mysteries and happenstances of old age. I will miss him forever."

United grieves with his family for the loss of this brilliant, humble, and transformational man. The community is truly grateful for the legacy of Rev. Dr. Clyde Steckel.

Read more at [bit.ly/clyde-steckel](https://bit.ly/clyde-steckel).



## THE LIVING LEGACY OF DR. JUDITH SCOVILLE

by Nathaniel Green

"We've got to get you a Presidential scholarship," Dr. Mary Farrell Bednarowski urged the prospective student in an interview. "Does this mean I've been admitted?" the interviewee asked.

This is how Dr. Judith Scoville ('90) received a gift that would shape her life and, through her reciprocated generosity, reverberate decades later in the lives of new generations of United students. It was, in her words, "the biggest academic honor I'd ever received."

Judith came to United after several years in an Education for Ministry program facilitated by an Episcopal seminary. The Education for Ministry program was predicated on asking, "What are we called to do? What is our ministry?" At the time, Judith was working for "not a very ethical company," she quipped, but this experience sparked her interest in and passion for ethics. "I was in St. Luke's Episcopal Church," Judith recalls, "and for four years... it was a small group of us [that] met every week," studying Scripture, theology, and church history. Nearing the end of the program, the associate minister remarked "maybe I should

go to United." For Judith, "Coming to United was part of pursuing that question of 'what is my ministry?'"

After graduating from United in 1990, Judith began pursuing her PhD in ethics at the Graduate Theological Union. While there, she taught Christian ethics at United as an adjunct professor. A student, friend, and mentee of Dr. James B. Nelson, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics (1963–1995), Judith discovered her ministry as an educator. "My students were so special," she remarks. "I found at United that... if you ran a class so that you were providing students with an opportunity, ... they will become a part of shaping the class and making it what it is." She avers, "You don't just pour information [into] United students."

Judith later became an associate professor and the Hulings Distinguished Chair in the Humanities for Northland College. She gave United's first-ever Picard Lecture on Environmental Theology and Ethics, and her participation in the life of the seminary spans decades. From alum to professor to donor, her contributions to the United community are hard to overstate.

Now in her mid-80s, Judith—as a quick-witted and incisive as ever—is crafting a living legacy. Since the death of her husband, Dr. James (Jim) Scoville, Judith has committed to using her resources for good. Ever conscious of ethics, it became, in her mind, "a moral obligation" to give back. And so, Judith brought her scholarship experience full circle by recently making a significant gift to United's endowed scholarship fund, securing access to the transformative power of theological

education for future students. She is quick to note, "To me, it does not feel like generosity... It's what I want to do." She feels "an ethical obligation" to use her money to build a better society "richer in all the things that count."

"I don't want the ability to go to United to be limited by the ability to pay," she asserts. "I want everybody who... wants to be part of this community to be able to do that no matter what their finances are." She knows it will "enrich United to have as broad of a variety of students as possible," and that if "we're all white middle-class people, then it's a very impoverished community."

Judith and Jim are also celebrated members of the Barnabas Society, which honors individuals who include United in their estate plans or make other qualifying gift arrangements. Asked why others should consider making a gift, she thoughtfully reflects, "It's a very satisfying thing to give to United. It makes me feel like I'm doing something positive and constructive." She continues, "I'm proud of the results that I see at United... It makes me happy." We give abundant thanks for the vibrant, living legacy of Judith Scoville.

**Support a *rigorous* education for the next generation with a legacy gift.**

To learn more, contact Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson at 651-255-6137 or [cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu).



## REMEMBERING DR. MARILYN J. SALMON

Dr. Marilyn J. Salmon, Professor Emerita of New Testament Theology (1989–2014), is fondly remembered as a committed scholar, a dedicated teacher, a faithful religious leader, and an early and passionate advocate for interfaith dialogue and understanding. She made significant contributions to students' more nuanced and

broadened understanding of the New Testament, encouraging them to approach texts with creativity and imagination. Her leadership skills were also evident at United where she served in administrative roles, including acting dean.

Dr. Kita McVay ('96, '09), former United President, writes, "Marilyn

could hold in tension the multiple interests within the seminary, from fundraising to analyzing new models of education, and brought her deep experience of United and its singular identity to the role of acting dean."

President Molly T. Marshall observes, "United grieves the death of this fine scholar-practitioner who expanded the seminary's inter-religious engagement... We give thanks for her graceful imprint."

**Read more at [bit.ly/marilyn-salmon](http://bit.ly/marilyn-salmon).**



## A MESSAGE FROM ADVANCEMENT REV. DR. CINDI BETH JOHNSON

### Dear Friend of United,

In February, we sent Valentine's Day cards to members of United's Barnabas Society. The Barnabas Society is constituted by individuals who have included United in their estate plans or made other arrangements that reflect their values and provide long-term support for United's mission.

Expressing our love for Barnabas Society members is easy to do. Legacy gifts allow United to provide resources for students, support our operations, and offer scholarships to minimize the cost of theological education. Those who sense a call to seminary often do so at great sacrifice. Of our students, 95 percent receive scholarships, often weaving them together from myriad sources.

This year's Valentine featured a work by artist Lisa Hey Skildum. The piece is titled "From the Bottom of My Heart." When I hear students talk about the impact of their scholarships, they frequently say, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart. This scholarship means that I can pursue my call at United."

Supporting theological education through legacy planning is a powerful way to invest in the future. Theological institutions play a crucial role in training pastors, scholars, and community leaders who help shape and work toward the common good. For most people,

a legacy gift is the largest gift they will make. It needs to align with their values and support the things they hold most dear. Legacy gifts designated for United are expressions of love that reflect one's deepest beliefs and passions.

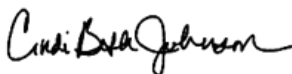
As is noted in this issue, we have just said goodbye to three treasured members of United's retired faculty. Each of them, in their own manner, have contributed in a lasting way to United through their legacy as teachers, mentors, and believers. Though they are now gone, their impact will continue to be felt by their students and by the communities their students serve.

**Legacy gifts designated  
for United are  
expressions of love that  
reflect one's deepest  
beliefs and passions.**

We give thanks for their abundant gifts. And, we give thanks for your generous support. No matter how you choose to support United, you are making a difference.

Your gifts help prepare innovative and compassionate leaders for the equipping of churches, other faith communities, and society towards justice and peace.

Gratefully,



Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson  
*Vice President for Advancement*



### THE BARNABAS SOCIETY

Members of the Barnabas Society have chosen to include United in their wills, make life income gifts, or made the seminary the beneficiary of a retirement account or insurance policy.

We greatly appreciate the long-term commitment of all Barnabas Society members. Their foresight ensures the longevity and vitality of United.

If you are interested in talking about a legacy gift, or if you have a legacy gift we may not be aware of, please let us know. We want to thank you for your stewardship and welcome you into the Barnabas Society.

Contact Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson, Vice President for Advancement, at [cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu) or 651-255-6137.

### FROM THE PRESIDENT — A GENERATIONAL RELAY

United has grieved three cherished professors in recent weeks: Bob Bryant, Clyde Steckel, and Marilyn Salmon. Each left a graceful imprint on the life of the seminary, and treasured colleagues gratefully hold their memory as a blessing.

Since then, the Dean and I heard stories of these remarkable lives

recounted by former faculty members. Generously, these faculty forebears were keenly interested in what the present United faculty is up to.

When asked, the Dean and I proudly pointed to their excellent scholarship, their vigorous publishing, and their attentiveness to students.

They affirmed that this generation is building upon their foundation. They passed a brightly burning torch, and younger colleagues are adding to the ongoing story of United, grateful for those who lit the way before them.



## STAY CONNECTED

### Cindi Beth Johnson

Vice President for Advancement  
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*New & Noteworthy*

## ROSSMANN FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AWARD LAUNCHES IN 2025

The Rossmanns, who prize education by word and deed, have already established faculty development and excellence awards at Macalester and the University of Minnesota. Now they have generously extended faculty support to United.

As they explained recently, "Faculty excellence is crucial to the continued success of United Seminary. We hope that the Rossmann Faculty Development Award will play a role in helping to maintain that excellence."

Starting this year, United faculty members can apply for support twice each year. Applications are due either February 1 or October 1. If granted, awards will support activities such as attending professional meetings, offsetting publication-related expenses (including stipends for students who assist with

publication tasks), and hiring consultants to assist with writing or teaching activities.

"Jack and Marty Rossmann established this award," noted President Molly T. Marshall, "because of their own academic careers and their love of supporting faculty development."

For their continuing service and generosity, Jack and Marty Rossmann have our deepest gratitude. We honor their lifelong commitment to education and working toward the betterment of society.

### by Diane Riggs

We are thrilled to share that Jack and Marty Rossmann have endowed a fund to support faculty development at United. Jack, a current United board member, is a Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Macalester College, and Marty is a Professor Emerita of Family Education at the University of Minnesota.