

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES

WINTER 2024

# VOICES



detail of "Coneflower Garden" by Kimber Olson ('10)





## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

### REV. DR. MOLLY T. MARSHALL

**Dear Friend of United,**

Though we know the short, cold days and long nights in deep winter are temporary, that the promise of spring can be counted in mere weeks, our anticipation of blooming flowers and birdsong can feel interminable. Even so, we mustn't forget that winter has its purpose, a vocation that—not fully realized—would undermine the very change we long to see. So, we wait, knowing that under the surface, deep in the earth, life is at work. It persists, stewarded by countless unseen processes until it emerges in a lush and vibrant spring, indeed a resurrection.

United is in its own season of emergence. We are seeing the fruits of many steady hands that have stewarded this community. In January, we shared one such example: a highlight from The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), our accrediting body. Presently, 55 percent of schools are losing enrollment while 45 percent are growing, and there are only 18 ATS-accredited schools (of 279) that have shown year-over-year growth in each of the last five years. United is one of those 18 and, in my review, we are the only theologically progressive mainline seminary among them.

This exceptional news invites a question I've received repeatedly from my peers: Why is United growing? Here's what I know: United has a desirable curriculum with an emphasis on social transformation, theology and the arts, interreligious engagement, and public theology, taught by student-focused faculty who excel in their disciplines and teaching. United is accessible for online learning, with a robust distance learning culture. We welcome students with myriad religious, spiritual, and theological leanings. And most of all, United is as interested in the questions as the answers.

As we look toward the completion of this term, I am reminded of the many voices throughout United's history who have raised perspective-shifting questions and sought justice and peace in a world rent by oppression, conflict, and violence. Theological education offers the hope of transformation, a future made possible through your faithful support and financial contributions. A sterling example of this faithfulness is the new Sophia Chair in Religious and Theological Studies established by the Bednarowskis. We celebrate strengthening this area of inquiry.

Even as we flourish, we know there are many questions still to be asked and possibilities to be imagined. In the following pages, you will be encouraged by the stories of friends, students, and alums committed to this work. May you be reminded that United's mission is more relevant and consequential than ever.

Gratefully,

*Molly T. Marshall*

**Molly T. Marshall**  
President

“

*We are seeing the fruits  
of many steady hands  
that have stewarded  
this community.*



## ARTIST PROFILE

### KIMBER OLSON ('10)

Kimber Olson, a multidisciplinary artist and arts educator, earned her MA in Theology and the Arts from United in 2010. Her work explores themes of fragility, resilience, and impermanence through imagery that references rhythms and flux in the natural world. Color, pattern, and texture also factor prominently in her work.

Approaches include painting, collage, and textile processes. In addition to a committed studio practice, she conceives and leads community-based art projects in settings that include senior residences, correctional facilities, residential shelters, and more. At United, Kimber focused her studies around the intersection of art, creativity, and spirit to better understand ways in which imagination and the artistic endeavor build connection and community and contribute to





# PANEL INAUGURATES SECOND WAVE OF UNITED'S ANTI-RACIST INITIATIVES

Held October 23, 2023, on the first evening of Symposium Week, "Reorienting Ourselves to the Reality of Not Yet" was a public event that officially launched the second wave of United's Anti-Racist Initiatives. This next phase will focus on student formation and public engagement.

As Rev. Dr. Gary Green, United's director of Anti-Racist Initiatives and assistant professor of pastoral theology and social transformation, stated during the introduction, "This panel event tonight is about anti-racism, and it's an invitation for us to think about it differently and to re-engage with it creatively. The title... is a play on the theological concept 'already not yet,' which holds together the fact that our present work is an active participation in building the hope for a world we imagine, even while...that world has not fully come to fruition."



Participants saw a video that outlined United's vision for this work and featured faculty speaking about their commitment to creatively engaging with anti-racism in their teaching and scholarship. Gary then moderated an evocative and enlightening conversation with two extraordinary scholar-activists: Dr. Danielle Fuentes Morgan—associate professor at Santa Clara University and author of *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century*—and Terresa Moses, MFA—assistant professor of graphic design and director of design justice at University of Minnesota's College of Design, and author of *Racism Untaught*.

Ultimately, the panelists concluded that there is much work ahead of us in the struggle to disrupt white supremacy. United needs to be part of the solution, which is why we will continue to center our Anti-Racist Initiatives in-house and more broadly.

*If you were unable to join us for United's public Symposium Week events, you can stream both sessions online via YouTube at [bit.ly/fall-2023-symposiumweek](https://bit.ly/fall-2023-symposiumweek).*



self-knowledge. Since graduating, she has received numerous grants for her art and innovative programs, and her work has been exhibited widely throughout Minnesota and beyond.

Recently, she completed a 2022 Creative Support for Individuals grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board for a textile arts program at Brittany's Place, a shelter in Saint Paul that supports youth who have been victimized through

sexual exploitation. Through a series of workshops over several months, more than 20 youth created unique designs on cloth using surface design processes such as soy wax batik, block printing, gelatin plate mono-printing, and shibori dyeing.

The artists' efforts culminated in a large textile that now hangs in the shelter's contemplative space. Titled "Honeycomb" (picture at right), the artwork is a reflection of community, collaboration, and creativity.





# REV. SHANNON DYCUS ILLUMINATES THE SACRED IN EDUCATION AND MINISTRY

by Diane Riggs

For DMin student Rev. Shannon Dycus, faith and education have been foundational influences and pursuits. “My story,” Shannon shares, “includes the nurture of wonderful Black women in my life and lineage. My grandmothers and mother modeled faithful and bold ways of living out their calls with ministries that were not allowed to flourish in their contexts.” In high school, a counselor saw her creative and leadership potential for guiding others.

At Butler University, she earned a degree in secondary education. While she enjoyed working with young people in the classroom and after-school programs, Shannon felt something was missing. “I felt the gap,” she recalls, “of how to care for their spirits and lead holistically.”

When she started at Christian Theological Seminary, Shannon intended to train as a therapist, but, as she recounts, “loving a congregation drew me in the path of an MDiv.” In 2019, she assumed the role of dean of students at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), a private university in Harrisburg, Virginia, that “integrates Christian faith, academic rigor, artistic creation, and reflective practice.”

“It all lives in my heart and body as ministry and education,” Shannon explains. “Since graduating from college, I have alternated between leading in ministry settings and learning communities, holding these two parts of myself as overlapping but not fully embraced in any specific space.”

## PURSUING A DOCTORAL DEGREE

In early 2023, EMU promoted Shannon to vice president of student affairs and dean of students. Her priorities in this role involve strategically visioning co-curricular learning communities that promote social responsibility, holistic well-being, and academic success for EMU students. She also teaches several undergraduate courses, including a spiritual formation course. She earned a certificate in Spiritual Direction and Formation from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

In her current role, Shannon asserts that she is responsible for “nurturing both spiritual and educational formation.” She felt compelled to enter a doctoral program to “do more development to integrate the two as grounding and strength.” While a PhD or EdD would have made sense in her academic context, she needed ample space for ministry too.

“I believe the practices of education and ministry are sacred,” Shannon posits, “serving people and communities as they intersect with the hope of God around us. Seeking this degree is rooted in my hope to ground the rest of my career in practical perspectives that allow this belief to flourish.”

## CHOOSING UNITED

Shannon has been long drawn to those who “do their faith.” These public theologians operate with an awareness



Rev. Shannon Dycus

of their social context and with a determination to serve and support the common good. “In my search for public theology programs,” Shannon observes, “United emerged quickly. Mason [Mennenga ('22), Admissions Counselor] was a prophetic voice in my discerning, and Dr. [Demian] Wheeler was the kind of thinker and leader I wanted to learn from.”

For her dissertation, Shannon is researching and developing a tool to help faith-based higher education systemically engage practices of liberation. “That,” she explains, “is helping me advance the question of how structures teach power.”

She continues: “My doctoral work and my vocation are in rich conversation with each other, like they are sitting on a warm porch drinking sweet tea while listening to each other and the wind hitting the trees. Not only has my role given me the chance to integrate my gifts, this program and my work at United is helping me give voice to the integration growing within me.”



Helen and Rev. Dr. Daniel Jonas ('63)

## UNITED SALUTES THE CLASS OF 1963

In 1963, United's first graduating class numbered an even dozen. All had started seminary at Mission House, and most were subsequently ordained United Church of Christ (UCC). Though many are of blessed memory, we wanted to pay homage to the class and a few of its surviving members.

For many, connections were forged during undergraduate studies at Lakeland University (Mission House School until 1956). Ten classmates, including Jonathan Bunge,\* Abner Frost,\* Jerry Flueckiger,\*

Daniel Jonas, Orville Krebs,\* John Krueger (whose father was Lakeland's president), Terence McCreedy,\* and Donald Stoeber\* all graduated from Lakeland.

What was that first class like? According to Rev. Dr. John Rinehart, “Our class... was a community.” The move to United's unfinished campus in Minnesota further cemented the bond. Rev. Dr. Dan Jonas, Rev. Krueger, and Rinehart recall lugging possessions—even a grand piano for a faculty member's wife—through the muddy streets. When Jonathan Bunge died tragically in 1969, the class created a memorial scholarship in his name.

# BISHOP LORNA HALAAS IMAGINES THE FUTURE OF SEMINARY AND THE CHURCH

by Nathaniel Green

Born on the prairie of western North Dakota, Bishop Lorna Halaas ('08) grew up in a family of storytellers. She was raised in Lutheran churches and recounts that her faith community was central to her life. One special lay leader—Mrs. Kurth—inspired her to consider ministry as a possibility, even before women could be ordained in her denomination.

She recalls, “We had women who served on church staff who did faith formation, who did youth ministry, but I particularly remember a woman who served almost as a pastor. She taught Sunday school, confirmation, and oversaw the Christmas program.” As a young woman, Lorna said to herself, “I want to be Mrs. Kurth when I grow up.”

Like many women called to ministry, Lorna’s vocational path was not without obstacles. “When I was a kid,” she shares, “women in the Lutheran tradition were not ordained and could not serve as pastors. That was a little more than 50 years ago.” Lorna graduated from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, in 1979, just nine years after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) began ordaining women. For many years, she served as a director of Christian education in large congregations in Minot, North Dakota, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and also for the ELCA’s publishing ministry, Augsburg Fortress.

So how did a Lutheran end up at United? She surprised herself: “I didn’t know much

about United—I knew they had a good Women’s Studies program, and I knew they were very ecumenical and diverse.” While still considering her options, Lorna attended an event at United. The experience was transformative. “I felt like a kid,” proclaiming, “I have found my spot!”

Lorna benefited tremendously from the instruction she received from United’s faculty, particularly Professor Emeritus Dr. Eleazar Fernandez and Distinguished Professor Emeritus Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates. She also prized the diversity of students. Citing interreligious and ecumenical partnerships she found at United, Lorna valued the ability to relate across differences through the power of stories. “I was the Lutheran; other students were Southern Baptist, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Muslim, Jewish, along with those from other Christian denominations. We had the most wonderful conversations.”

For her, United’s interreligious and ecumenical learning environment felt right. “This is what the world was like... ‘This is my story, now tell me your story, and we will find common ground here in one another’s story.’” Lorna graduated from United in 2008 with an MDiv.

In the years following graduation, Lorna served as a pastor in congregations in North Dakota and Iowa. In 2019, she was elected to serve a six-year term as Bishop of the Western Iowa Synod ELCA, overseeing 116 congregations. In keeping with her imaginative family—and, no doubt, the

After graduation, most began preaching. Remarkably, several also earned DMin, including Krebs and Glenn Bender.\* After a short stint as a chaplain at Kodaikanal Christian School in India, Jonas earned his DMin from McCormick Theological Seminary (IL). Lakeland University gave Krueger an honorary DMin, and Rinehart returned to United for his DMin.

The class also has a strong record of service. Krueger, during years of successful church planting in Indiana, rose through the UCC and became conference minister for the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference in 1991. He also became United’s first Distinguished Alum that year. Rev. Abner Frost started

out as a traveling “chaplain in residence,” working alongside migrant farm workers. Jonas, who joined an ecumenical campus ministry program at UW-River Falls during the era of Vietnam protests, founded a non-denominational pastoral counseling center in Milwaukee. He retired from counseling in 2018, 40 years later.

Rev. Dr. Art Merrill,\* Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Rinehart recalls, “I lectured that on the scale of justice, the God of the Old Testament weighed in on behalf of the abandoned.” Disillusioned by churches “insulated... from the cares of the world,” Rinehart was an Accredited Airport Executive for 32 years, but also



Bishop Lorna Halaas ('08)

creativity intrinsic to United’s ethos—Lorna centers divine imagination in her view of the world. “If you ask the synod staff who work with me, they will say, ‘She is always asking us about our passion, what we’re curious about, and what might God be imagining for the church today.’”

In 2025, Lorna will be up for reelection as Bishop. She believes, however, “it’s time for younger leaders... There are new voices, new ideas.” While many may view the future of congregational ministry warily, Lorna is looking with courage to what lies ahead.

Present-day seminarians are preparing to serve a world with unique challenges not often faced by the generations of ministers who came before them. “I see pastors being equipped differently; I see people going to seminary not to do it all, but to preach, teach, and to equip lay people to go beyond the doors of the church and to be the church on the streets, in the shelters; wherever they may go, there God is.” We give thanks for Lorna’s humble, imaginative witness as a friend and alum of United.

accepted part-time callings, including an affirming ministry with a rural Nebraska congregation during the AIDS epidemic.

Jonas, Krueger, and Rinehart still treasure the education they received and the comradery. United, notes Rinehart, “has been my spiritual Pillar of Cloud during my good days, and the Pillar of Fire during my bad days.” In the words of St. Francis, he concludes, “Go preach the gospel, and if you must, use words.”

\* Deceased



# KEITH AND MARY FARRELL BEDNAROWSKI ESTABLISH THE SOPHIA CHAIR IN RELIGIOUS AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

In February, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities was thrilled to announce the establishment of the Sophia Chair in Religious and Theological Studies. Realized through a generous donation by Dr. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies (1976–2004), and her husband, Keith Bednarowski, the Sophia Chair makes possible a tenure-track, endowed faculty position.

An endowed chair is often named by the donor(s) whose gift establishes it. When considering this responsibility, Mary believed it “appropriate and appealing to name the chair after an ‘idea’ with sufficient depth of meaning, complexity, and connection to United. The name needed to inspire creative and dynamic explorations of religion, theology, and culture, an emphasis deeply embedded in all versions of the curriculum since United opened in 1962.”

For Mary, the concept of “Wisdom” came to her immediately. “Within seconds of thinking ‘Wisdom!’ there was ‘Sophia’ with its call to the feminine spirit of the Divine, and its connections to the Re-Imagining Community celebrating women’s theological creativity, which has been so much a part of United’s history.”

“It suggests,” Mary asserts, “not only ‘knowledge,’ but the desire and capacity to put that knowledge to good use, to discern how to proceed based on what we have learned, to explore what to do with the knowledge we have acquired.”

Sophia raises questions that, for Mary, evoke “the *more*.”

“I like to think of Sophia as the patron spirit of asking both new and old, profound, life-giving questions.” She continues, “I like to think of her as the inspiring spirit of the theological and religious imagination.”

As a member of the United community for nearly 50 years, Mary observes that United has had distinct impacts on theological and religious education, both in the Twin Cities and beyond. She affirms that United has fostered an educational environment where “theological studies and religious studies dance happily together.” The religious studies aspect of the chair reinforces United’s long time insistence on the dynamic and creative relationship between theology and culture.

For President Molly T. Marshall, this is an auspicious occasion in the life of United. “We revel in charting new pathways of wisdom even as we explore the faith traditions we have inherited. We anticipate that this faculty chair will extend the legacy of Mary’s scholarship and honor her capacity to encourage students to find critical distance from their traditions for the sake of clarification and commitment. Her search for wisdom will continue at United.”

Mary insists that United must impact the social landscape as much as we possibly can for the sake of the common good. She continues, “I deeply believe we have



Mary Farrell Bednarowski and Keith Bednarowski

to bring as much depth of response as possible to the profoundly evocative and complicated question, ‘What is going on here?’ Then comes the next question, ‘What are the most just and loving ways to respond?’ There is no doubt in Mary’s mind that United will continue to have a part in this essential work. Looking ahead, she says, “I have a very deep faith that this full-of-life seminary will persist and flourish for many, many years. Keith and I want to be part of that flourishing.”

United excitedly anticipates the installation of Dr. Demian Wheeler, associate professor of philosophical theology and religious studies, into the newly established Sophia Chair during Fall Convocation on September 26, 2024.

## SUPPORT A RIGOROUS EDUCATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

To learn more about Legacy Giving and Barnabas Society membership, contact Cindy Schriever at 651-255-6111 or [cschriever@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:cschriever@unitedseminary.edu).

## CELEBRATING THE GENEROSITY OF REV. JIM PECK

Rev. Jim Peck ('99), who has roots in Georgia, grew up in the Southern Baptist faith tradition and felt a sense of calling in his teens. At 18, when he realized he was gay, Jim knew he couldn't be a Baptist preacher, so decided to try his hand at city and regional planning and public policy. He found the United Church of Christ in the 1980s as a young adult.

His sense of calling renewed while living in Denver. Jim decided to attend a UCC seminary, and after visiting three, he enrolled at United. As he shares, “United was so hospitable and welcoming!” He also appreciated United’s field placement program and emphasis on cross-cultural engagement. A 1997 Philippines immersion trip with Rev. Glen Harrington-Hall ('89) and Rev. Dr. Eleazar Fernandez, professor emeritus, was life-changing.

Since graduating, Jim has served as a pastor in Minnesota and California, where he still lives. He also made a habit

of donating to United every year. That calculation changed when, in 2021, Jim’s mother, Helen, passed away at the age of 100. An accomplished woman, Helen earned a master’s degree in library science in 1946 and worked as a librarian in private and public settings.

Before she died, Helen encouraged Jim to tithe his inheritance, so now, Jim says, he can give more to United.

Why does he give to United? First, Jim appreciates the education he received. “United,” he suggests, “took me from



Dr. Kita McVay ('96) and her Christmas Cactus

### Dear Friends of United,

The last few months have been a time of great excitement and enthusiasm at United. It has been a time of flourishing because of you—your support makes it happen! Let me share some recent signs of progress and momentum.

President Marshall, in her letter, has alerted you to news about our stellar enrollment growth. You make this happen by providing operating and scholarship support. You make this happen by referring friends and colleagues to our enrollment team. You make this happen by telling others about the transformative educational work that United is doing.

We have reached our 61st year because of the faithful dedication of both long-time donors and new friends of United. Each generation supports the mission of the seminary to steward it for the next generation. In Advancement, we are always in the practice of looking forward and giving thanks for what has been.

clueless to confident” and “expresses values I’ve known since childhood.” He also benefited from United’s focus on arts, lessons on pastoral listening, and training to interpret meaning in the world around him.

Second, he’s confident about United’s future. “I’m as excited about United Seminary right now as when I started there in 1995,” Jim asserts. He has witnessed how the seminary has adapted to the changing role of churches in society. “United has recognized,” Jim explains, “that

## A MESSAGE FROM ADVANCEMENT REV. DR. CINDI BETH JOHNSON, VICE PRESIDENT

In December, former president Dr. Kita McVay ('96) and her husband, Jim Johnson, invited board members, current and past, to a holiday gathering. Former trustees remarked that it was heartening to see the progress United has made and to meet the current board. Former trustee, Rev. Julie Mall ('85), reflected afterward, “I think that such a gathering offers a tangible witness to United’s history, as well as energizes us for the present, and offers us hope for the future!”

During the program, Rev. Dr. Jessica Chapman Lape, assistant professor and program director for interreligious chaplaincy, talked about her work with students. She reflected on the role of spiritual care and its power to heal, transform, and uplift people and communities in grief, transition, vulnerability, and oppression. Jessica shared the hopes of students to find relevant and transformative ways to provide spiritual care in congregations and wider communities.

In a moment that embodies United’s resilience and perseverance, Kita stepped forward to welcome guests, intriguing them with the brightly blooming Christmas cactus she carried. In her remarks, she noted that on her first day as president, in December 2005, she found this plant on her desk with a note of warm encouragement from a group of trustees, several of whom were present.

“I am not noted for having a green thumb with house plants,” said Kita, “but this cactus has survived, and looking at it today, one might even say thrived, over 19 years. It strikes me as a metaphor for United: United Theological Seminary over those years has faced adversity, confronted hard decisions. Threats of closure or merger met with a staunch conviction that there was a need in the world for United’s *sui generis* identity as a place that embodies ecumenism expansively defined, open inquiry, and the pursuit of social justice. Today, that vision is blossoming thanks to the devotion and courage of all of you here today.”

United’s mission matters to our students and to the communities that they will serve. Your ongoing financial support helps us flourish so our graduates can serve the church, other faith communities, and society for the sake of justice and peace.

We give thanks for you!

**Cindi Beth Johnson**  
Vice President for Advancement

### HOW TO GIVE

Mail your gift in the attached envelope, scan the QR code, or visit [unitedseminary.edu/give](http://unitedseminary.edu/give) today to give.



a theological education brings insights and skills to [many] settings.”

For Jim’s generosity and stalwart support, we are extraordinarily grateful. Donors and alums like Jim give us faith that United will indeed continue leaning into its mission.

Rev. Jim Peck and his mother, Helen,  
at Jim’s Graduation in 1999





## STAY CONNECTED

**Cindi Beth Johnson**

Vice President for Advancement  
cbjohnson@unitedseminary.edu  
651-255-6137

**Visit us Online**

unitedseminary.edu

**Support United Students**

**Give a Gift Today**

unitedseminary.edu/give

**Update Your Contact Information**

Provide all new address details  
(for mail and email) to  
afox@unitedseminary.edu



**UNITED**  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
OF THE TWIN CITIES

767 N Eustis St, Ste 140  
St. Paul, MN 55114

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT #2174  
TWIN CITIES, MN

## ACTING TOGETHER: A SERIES ON ACCOMPANIMENT

Attorneys and self-described Quaker Marxists Staughton and Alice Lynd have long reflected on the practice of accompaniment in social movements and in their lives. In memory of Staughton (1929–2022) and in partnership with Alice, the Leadership Center for Social Justice (LCSJ) is excited to feature a series of conversations in 2024 exploring the various dimensions of accompaniment and the possibilities it holds today for the work of social justice.

**Acting Together: A Series on Accompaniment**, held its first presentation January 31. Titled “Caregivers in a Care-less Society: A Panel on Care Work and Social Justice,” the event featured an expert panel of practitioners and scholars working at the intersections of pastoral and health care, disability justice, and social medicine.

As Rev. Dr. Ry Siggelkow, LCSJ director, noted during the session, “If we value life, we need to be organizing, and we need to be imagining different ways of caregiving.”

On March 6, at 7:00 PM, LCSJ will present a session about the Sacred Ally Quilt Ministry—a Justice and Witness Ministry of the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ—which memorializes George Floyd’s last words as he was killed by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020. Members from nine UCC congregations stitched together 11 impactful quilts that travel across the country. For **“The Right to Breathe: An Evening with the Sacred Ally Quilt Ministry,”** attendees will be able to see the quilts and hear from two of the three “Sacred Allies” behind the Quilt Ministry.

Then, on April 10, at 6:00 PM, LCSJ and the University of St. Thomas’ Justice and Peace Studies program will celebrate the seminal work of social justice activists Staughton and Alice Lynd. Presented at the University of St. Thomas, and in partnership with the University’s Justice and Peace Studies Program, **“Accompanying: The Journey of Staughton and Alice Lynd—A Documentary Viewing & Panel Conversation”** will showcase a new documentary about the Lynds and include an appearance, via Zoom, by Alice Lynd and the documentarian. Learn more and sign up for all upcoming LCSJ events [unitedseminary.edu/events/](https://unitedseminary.edu/events/)

