

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES

SPRING 2024



VOICES



"Three Birds and Pink Pops" by Dee Grover ('24)



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

REV. DR. MOLLY T. MARSHALL

Dear Friend of United,

In these days of expectance and celebration, we witness the seeds of theological education germinating throughout our world. The winds of the social landscape, our communities, and the needs shared by them scatter each new generation of United alums where they can take root. Our world is transformed through them, enriched and enlivened, and we have many reasons for which to be grateful.

On April 28, under the auspices of our gracious hosts, Plymouth Congregational Church and United trustee Rev. Dr. DeWayne Davis, we shared in the joy of Commencement. United's sixty-second graduation—and though longer than 60 seconds, our time together was filled with intention—expanded our family by another 50 alums, a noteworthy graduating class size in the seminary's history. As you will read in the issue to follow, we had the good fortune of hosting, as Commencement speaker, my friend Rev. Dr. R. Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, who enjoined the graduates, "Stand up, speak out, and step forward for the truth." Every alum, family, friend, faculty, and staff member left eager for the work of justice and peace.

As United begins its summer term, our fiscal year will soon end. From historic enrollment to the announcement of new programs, the endowed Sophia Chair in Religious and Theological Studies, and a full-tuition cohort for Black theological students in the Twin Cities, this has been a remarkable and groundbreaking year in United's history. The vision of transformative theological education and the world we aspire to build requires a clear focus and a sturdy foundation, realized through your faithful support.

With hope and gratitude, I invite you to consider how you might give in support of this vital, growing seminary. Your generosity waters the seeds planted in each class, chapel, and lecture, and we are sustained for a bright future because of you.

Our alums share a legacy of making possible transformative organizations, ministries, and pathways for change. The work of justice and peace, core to our mission and vision, is like a choir of many voices, each distinct in timbre and tone, yet collaborating in unison and harmony. In the pages that follow, from friends to alums to current students, you will find tangible evidence of the impact your support can have.

One of many voices,

Molly T. Marshall

Molly T. Marshall
President

“

*...we witness the seeds
of theological education
germinating throughout
our world.”*



ARTIST PROFILE DEE GROVER ('24)

Based in Pennsylvania, Desire (Dee) Grover ('24) has been a freelance illustrator and arts instructor for more than two decades and just earned her MA in Theology and the Arts from United. She grew up in the Church of God as the daughter of a preacher and suggests that her recent spiritual journey

caused her "to embrace a newfound appreciation for the Bible that is rooted in history and not in dogma."

Through her art, Dee explores the interplay of truth and hidden truths. "Most truth isn't hidden," she explains. "Many truths are simply either ignored or repackaged to ease whatever discomfort they might bring. It's the repackaging of the truth that intrigues me."



UNITED CELEBRATES ITS 62ND COMMENCEMENT WITH 50 GRADUATES

Hosted by our long-time partner, Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, we were privileged to celebrate our 62nd Commencement with a class of 50 graduates. Family, friends, United's faculty, staff, and board gathered to confer dozens of degrees and bless these new alums as they take flight into the next chapter of their transformative journey.

We were particularly grateful for the encouragement of our Commencement speaker, Rev. Dr. R. Mitch Randall, CEO of Good Faith Media, and President Molly T. Marshall's friend. In a stirring close to his message—titled "Where the Buffalo Roam: Decolonization Sets Us Free"—he charged those in attendance, "It is not our job to convert the world, but to love God and others by ensuring the world is a better place when we leave it."

We give thanks for these new graduates and wish them well as they step out to follow their callings, transforming the world for justice and peace.

Photo Credit: Michele Jokinen and Nathaniel Green



"So many objects, icons, symbols, and images have significant meaning," Dee continues, "and if placed together just right, we can have a visual dialogue about the most difficult things without feeling the need to run and hide."

Both an illustrator and a painter, Dee draws her inspiration from common objects—cotton, candies, donuts, skulls, ribbons, clouds, etc.—and lets viewers create their own meaning. "My personal truth behind

each painting," she admits, "remains hidden. There's something mischievously fun about it."

While studying at United, Dee acquired an interest in rare books and "illuminated manuscripts that feature the apocalyptic imagination." These days she is seeking rare books that she can visually reimagine, such as the Book of Hours, an elaborately illustrated late medieval prayer book intended for private devotion.

"Paintings," Dee concludes, "can be like a mirror....I am enjoying this journey and I have United to thank for this."

ISABEL NELSON ('24) FINDS KINSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE, RELIGION, AND STORYTELLING

by Diane Riggs

A physical theater and devising artist, Isabel Nelson ('24) traces her passion for theater back to childhood. "I have always been really compelled by story and the meaning that we make and drawn to what I call 'old story'—folk tales, fairy tales, myth, etc." At the same time, as a UCC minister's child and a Macalester College liberal arts graduate ('04), Isabel is deeply concerned with social justice. At United, she affirmed the kinship between justice, religion, and story, and gained a greater sense of self.

FINDING UNITED

Though Isabel double majored in theater and religious studies in college, she says her religious studies degree was "much more of an intellectual interest than a personal call." Instead, she undertook a two-year intensive physical theater training program in London. Transatlantic Love Affair, the company Isabel founded in 2010, "takes the seeds of an old story, and reimagines it into something really fresh and imaginative." The plays have no props or set pieces; stories are conveyed by the actors' movements, some dialogue, and imagination.

Back in Minnesota, working at Macalester College, Isabel was struck by how interreligious campus chaplains served the community in times of crisis. At one point during a racial reckoning, she recalls, the chaplains were able to "invite authentic

dialogue, hold a space that contained multiple perspectives, and guide folks toward wrestling with the hard questions and reaching mutual understanding."

This example of faith in action inspired Isabel to reconsider the idea of seminary. On a Zoom call with a colleague, she learned about United for the first time and our Theology and the Arts Program. Three months later, she enrolled.

FINDING HOME

While at United, Isabel began to understand when her heart first felt the spiritual tug toward justice, story, and religion. She traces that feeling back to the mountains in western North Carolina where her mother worked at Eagle's Nest Camp. "Every summer of my life, including in utero, I was surrounded by nature and music and play and physical activity. We moved around a lot when I was a child, and Eagle's Nest felt like home."

Returning to the camp many years later with her own children, Isabel was able to see the use of ritual and the ways in which "leaders of that community...called us to live into an interconnectedness with nature and presence with a sense of the Sacred." Isabel had come home again.

MOVING FORWARD

Isabel credits United for helping her to gain a deeper sense of herself and the



unique gifts she can share. Her social transformation course with Rev. Dr. Gary F. Green II, she asserts, "was the first class in which I really felt like I could start to articulate this intersection of creativity and social justice work and spirituality." Courses like Arts Praxis and Art, Religion, and Contemporary Culture with her advisor, Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman, have allowed Isabel the opportunity to continue to live into that vital connection.

What's next? Isabel wants to slow down for a time. "I want to gift myself as close to a fallow period as I have ever had." In addition to her theatrical pursuits, she still works as the administrative coordinator for the Lealtad-Suzuki Center for Social Justice at Macalester College and is happy there. When the time is right, she will live into the dream of where art, social justice, and spiritual practice will take her next.



REV. DR. R. MITCH RANDALL PROMOTES THE COMMON GOOD

Our 2024 commencement speaker, Rev. Dr. R. Mitch Randall, is the CEO of Good Faith Media. He also spent more than 20 years pastoring churches in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. And, like President Molly T. Marshall, he was raised in the Southern Baptist faith tradition. Happily, Mitch's values, beliefs, and theological views are also closely aligned with those we espouse at United.

Molly and Mitch have known each other for years. They have both been involved in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and have attended many of the same events. They also share key values such as inclusion and honoring those whom Christian traditions have dispossessed.

In early 2018, Mitch assumed leadership of the progressive Baptist Center for Ethics (BCE), founded by Robert Parham in 1991 to provide an ethical voice from "another kind of Baptist" than those in the conservative movement that overtook the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1990s. Two years later, on July 1, 2020,

AMOKÉ KUBAT ('17) TRANSFORMS ARTISTRY INTO ACTIVISM

by Diane Riggs

In 1987, Amoke Kubat ('17) moved from Los Angeles to Minneapolis. "I wanted to work with Prince," she explains. Two years later, she began a 25-year career teaching special education in North Minneapolis with Minneapolis Public Schools. Toward the end of that life chapter, Amoke discovered art, and art connected her to United.

CONNECTING TO UNITED

Chiaki O'Brien, a SAORI weaving artist from Japan, came to campus as a teacher during United's Summer Institute in Spirituality and the Arts. Amoke, who had already met Chiaki and wanted to learn more about SAORI weaving, came too. "I sat and watched United faculty and students learn to weave," Amoke recalls. "I was invited to weave."

After the event, she continues, "staff encouraged me to apply to the seminary. As a non-Christian, I was very reluctant to do so." Rev. Craig Lemming ('17), then a student who worked in admissions, walked Amoke to her bus stop and they began to talk. "Craig and I had a really deep conversation about United, social justice and religion, and Yoruba culture," she recounts, and she missed her bus.

After Craig chased down the bus, he handed Amoke an admissions packet and more information about United. "I felt I owed him that much for his time and making sure I got home," she reflects.

BCE (then operating as EthicsDaily.com) and Baptists Today (operating as Nurturing Faith) became Good Faith Media, with Mitch as CEO. Molly regularly wrote articles for BCE, and has since started writing for Good Faith Media.

"What I find so impressive about Mitch," Molly asserts, "is that he continues to explore well beyond the boundaries of Baptist identity. He has an expansive interest in interfaith work. He attends all kinds of things like the Festival of Homiletics, women in ministry gatherings, interfaith gatherings, things about religious liberty, and he is a prolific writer."

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Amoke earned an MA in Religious Leadership and a Certificate in Black Church Leadership at United. She also made lasting connections with fellow students and faculty—including Dr. Rufus Burrow, Rev. Dr. Jann Cather Weaver, Dr. Margaree Levy ('17) and Rev. Dr. John Lee ('19)—who were "inspiring and supportive." United "definitely holds a special place in my heart," she asserts, and seminary was "a challenging but stellar experience!"

Looking back, Amoke has especially fond memories of Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates and the arts curriculum at United. "I loved the Art Practicum that [Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson] taught during United's Summer Institute in Spirituality and the Arts and every member of that class. I would have loved to get a certificate in Art and Spirituality!"

LEANING INTO TRUTH

A lifelong learner, Amoke has earned a BA, two MAs, two certificates, and is still growing in knowledge. She has also experienced the worst of humanity—from the 1965 Watts and 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, to the 2020 murder of George Floyd and world pandemic—and fought tirelessly to empower mothers and families in disadvantaged communities.

It is the grounding and divine practices of making art, living with honesty, and forging relationships, that bring her some measure of solace. The recipient of multiple grants and fellowships, Amoke is the founding



executive director of YO MAMA'S HOUSE, Inc., an art and healing space for mothers.

She is also the author of *Missing Mama: My Story of Loss, Sorrow and Healing*, as well as self-referential plays such as *Angry Black Woman & Well-Intentioned White Girl*, and many other short stories and articles. She and her work have appeared in installations at the Weisman Art Museum, the South London Gallery, the Minnesota Museum of American Art, and the Cora McCovey Health and Wellness Center.

Though she will turn 74 in August, and lives with chronic pain, Amoke focuses on what's next. On April 29, she became the YWCA Minneapolis' Inaugural Camille J. Gage Fellowship Awardee, she is in discussion to have another show at the Minnesota Museum of American Art, and there is more writing and publishing to come in 2025. For her countless contributions, unwavering dedication, and indomitable spirit, we feel incredibly blessed to have Amoke Kubat as a United alum.

Through news and opinion, video and podcasts, publishing, and experiences, Good Faith Media promotes the common good, advocates for equal rights and protections, advances social responsibility and solidarity, and seeks to widen the circle of cooperation across faith traditions. The organization believes that "A rising tide lifts all boats."

As its mission states: "Good Faith Media's mission is to amplify freedom, inclusivity, and justice for people and partners utilizing multiple media platforms as a catalyst to produce and publish thoughtful, engaging, and inspiring content."

As Mitch exhorted United's 50 graduates on April 28, "It's time to roam like the buffalo of centuries before, trampling the ground as free beings, making the world a better place for others.... It is not our job to convert the world, but to love God and others by ensuring the world is a better place when we leave it." We are grateful for Mitch's witness in the work of interreligious engagement and his steadfast orientation toward justice and peace.

BOB MCCREA: REMEMBERING A STEADFAST AMBASSADOR FOR UNITED

by Diane Riggs

In his youth, Robert “Bob” Kyle McCrea* was an acolyte at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, and a founding member of the Edina High School Alpine Ski Team. As an adult, Bob was a founding partner and CEO of Colour Graphics Corporation, a member of St. Martin’s by-the-Lake Episcopal Church, and an active husband and father. He discovered United through his church Priest, Rev. Edwin John Eilertsen, who was a member of United’s Board of Trustees.

In 1976, Rev. Eilertsen encouraged Bob to take a course at United. One spring course, “Outlines of Christian Faith,” was all it took for Bob to decide to support United. Though he had to drive in a few evenings a week, Bob’s wife Polly remembers that he really enjoyed being a student, loved the environment at the school, and studying at United helped his faith journey.

Bob joined the board in 1978. His first role was on the vice presidential search committee. Between 1982 and 1983, Bob was a member of the finance committee, and from 1983 to 1985, he was board chair. He served on the executive committee from 1985 to 1986 and on board affairs from 1984 to 1986, co-chaired two fundraising campaigns, and helped lead the 50th anniversary committee in 2012.

Starting in 1978, Bob and Polly also began making regular donations to United and offering their fundraising expertise. They maintained that they had a responsibility to share their good fortune with causes in which they believed.

Bob appreciated that United was not only educating future clergy, but supplying a theological edge to those pursuing work in nonprofits, schools, or other organizations. An effective networker, Bob worked closely with then-President Wilson Yates and Dr. Mary Bednarowski. Wilson recalls that Bob was always introducing him to new people, saying, “Wilson, you have to meet this person!”

Gregarious by nature, Bob was a natural leader and staunch supporter. Long time friend Addison (Tad) Piper—whose father, Harry C. Piper, graduated from United in 1974—attests, “Bob was a person of strong loyalties. He cherished his relationship with the wonderful United board, staff, and faculty and worked hard to keep the institution strong, relevant, and vibrant.”

Bill George, former Medtronic CEO and United board member, asserts: “Bob McCrea was the most dedicated member of the United board. He was constantly talking about the good things happening at United and how important its work is. Long after he retired from the board, we continued working with prospective donors to raise money for United. I can’t imagine anyone serving a board better than Bob.”

At a sold-out luncheon in late 2014, the Minnesota Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals honored Bob and Polly McCrea with the prestigious Outstanding Volunteer Fundraisers award. Speaking at the event, Bob said, “It’s a pleasure to share our enthusiasm for a



good cause, program, or community resource with friends and acquaintances who might find value in supporting these organizations as well. It is a role of connecting the dots.”

Polly notes that Bob’s hope for United was that it would become self-sustaining, and continue to grow. She adds, “I think one of the things we loved about United was making a lot of very good friends. We always enjoyed programs and the opportunities to hear speakers. United was a very important part of our life.”

United is humbly grateful for the stalwart support that Bob and Polly McCrea gave to the seminary over four decades. Blessed be the memory of Bob McCrea.

** indicates those of blessed memory*

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.



2024 DISTINGUISHED ALUM: SUE SWANSON ('05)

A highly skilled artist, teacher, and retreat leader, Sue has been serving communities through her arts ministry, Purple Apple Arts, since 2000. Classes, workshops, and retreats offer gateways to healing, wholeness, and meditation through art—beadwork, collage, knitting, labyrinth, Zentangle-style meditative drawing, journal-making, clay work, painting,

drawing, music, and ritual. She calls her integrative ministry work Prayercraft.

According to nominator Kathy Deacon-Weber ('97), “Sue lives with intention.” She grounds her ministry with daily journaling and art practice, takes one art class every month, and offers up to four classes each month in art centers, churches, stores, conferences, schools, and with private groups.

Read more about Sue at blog.unitedseminary.edu/the-canvas.

A MESSAGE FROM ADVANCEMENT

REV. DR. CINDI BETH JOHNSON, VICE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of United,

Alum support—through gifts, legacy plans, recurring gifts, and more—enables United to prepare innovative and compassionate leaders for the equipping of churches, other faith communities, and society toward justice and peace.

Many times the first gift we receive from an alum comes in a class gift. This year's graduating class had "Expansion" as their theme. In communicating with their peers from the class of 2024, graduates were encouraged to give back, responding to the generosity of past alums who provided scholarship funds and operational support. The clear message was that they were invited to give back because financial gifts from previous classes made their education at United possible.

Gifts we receive from alums are critical to our ability to live out our mission. Upon graduation, many alums begin a pattern of yearly support for the United Fund that endures through their lifetime. Those gifts that begin with graduation and continue for many years have an enormous impact. Year over year, our alums are faithful and generous donors who support United's mission and make the work that we do possible.

At our United Days banquet we honored new members of the Bossard Ward Society. Bossard Ward Society members have each given more than \$10,000 during

their lifetime. On May 9, we welcomed six new alums into the Bossard Ward Society. Together, those alums represent 128 years of giving.

When asked to reflect on why they gave to United, new members offered similar reasons: finding a sense of home at United, discovering a language that they had been yearning to know, the combination of a place to study and the opportunity to be part of a community, and a community that prepared them for a journey of life and faith. All of them named their gratitude and appreciation for their fellow students, faculty, and staff. Donors offered thanks for not only what they learned, but also for being encouraged to keep learning, encouraged to keep being curious.

At Commencement on April 28, 50 students from the class of 2024 were celebrated as graduates. As a class, they are literally an embodiment of many voices united for justice and peace. The impact of their work as leaders will be seen in nonprofits, faith communities, hospitals, and more. We could not be more grateful for our new alums.

The class of 2024 joins with classes from the last six decades in working to make the world a better place by leading faithfully in complex and anxious times and transforming communities. We couldn't do this work without your support.

2024 SPIRIT OF UNITED ALUM: REV. CLARE GROMOLL ('14)

Rev. Clare Gromoll— an adventurous scholar, gifted pastor, and skilled and thoughtful consensus builder— has accomplished much since earning her degree. "At first glance," notes Rev. Kimi Floyd Riesch ('19, '24), "nominating a person who has centered their work in parish ministry might seem strange, but that is only if you do not know the full scope of what Clare does in her life."

Currently, Clare serves as the pastor at St. Croix United Church in Bayport, Minnesota—a congregation recently formed from the merger of two local churches. While working through the challenges of joining two congregations, she joined the Leadership Center for Social Justice's first cohort. "United has played a significant role in nurturing my approach to ministry," Clare asserts.

Read more about Clare at blog.unitedseminary.edu/the-canvas.



United took me in and opened to me the potency of theology, justice, and leadership in community. My relationship with United has lasted for three decades. Through those years I have continued to learn and grow because of United. Serving on the Board of Trustees has furthered my gratitude for the power generated by superb faculty, staff, and students committed to relevant and beautiful witness.

Rev. Elizabeth Macaulay ('99), pictured above

United's ability to prepare innovative and compassionate leaders happens because of your investment in our mission.

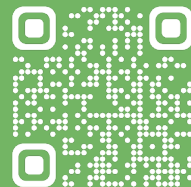
With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cindi Beth Johnson".

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 today to give.



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DONORS MAKE NEW SIMS SCHOLARS PROGRAM POSSIBLE

by Diane Riggs

Since it was announced in mid-February, the Sims Scholars initiative—through which up to eight Black theology students in the Twin Cities can earn a tuition-free seminary degree at United—has been put into motion. At an advisory committee meeting in May, members expressed their excitement about progress made in the intervening months, and extreme gratitude to initiative funders Frank and Robyn Sims.

Most notably, United just launched the online application for prospective Sims Scholars. The admissions team has fielded questions from about 15 potential applicants and hopes to have would-be candidates formally apply. In addition to United's standard requirements, Sims Scholar applicants are required to submit evidence of leadership (as in a sermon, article, or another experience or artifact), and finalists will undergo personal interviews.

Dean Kyle Roberts announced that he and Rev. Dr. Gary Green have also designed the Master of Arts in Leadership curriculum for the initial Sims Scholars cohort this fall. In addition to core seminary courses—including Invitation to Theology, Christian Ethics, and Spiritual and Personal Formation—Sims Scholars will focus on Black and womanist theological studies with a decolonial throughline, be offered extracurricular opportunities, and have their choice of electives.

Rev. Stacey Smith ('16)—vice chair of United's board and advisory committee member—actually benefited from a Sims' scholarship. She asserted that this program provides “an amazing opportunity for Black students to come [to United] and have immediate community and experience seminary in a way that will help them blossom and gain additional skills within a representative cohort.”

The hope, Stacey continued, is that this initiative will graduate leaders “who are confident in their vocation” and have backing from “a supportive institution and a supportive benefactor who thought enough of them to provide an education that will benefit not only them, but will benefit a community, a nation, and maybe a world.”

Know someone who is qualified for and might be interested in this initiative? Refer them to admissions (admissions@unitedseminary.edu or 651-255-6119) or the application at unitedseminary.edu/academics/sims-scholars-program.

