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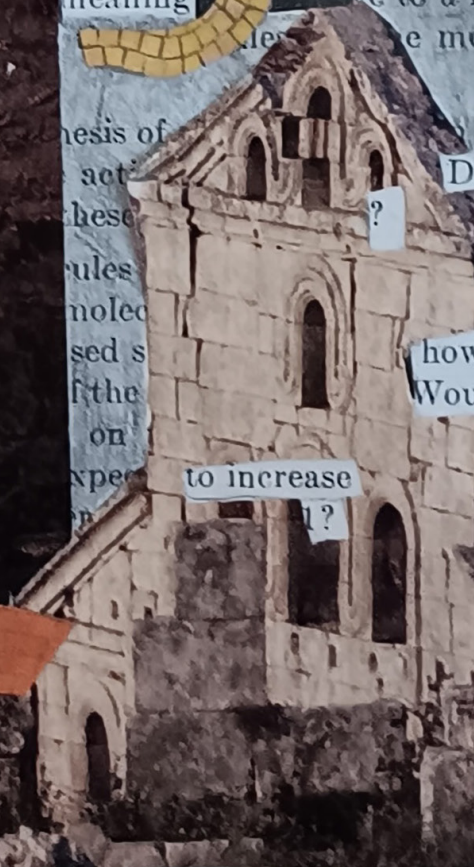
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A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT REV. DR. MOLLY T. MARSHALL

Dear Faithful Friends of United,

Every epoch has its challenges, and the temptation of those who live in the present one is to think that the world has never seen anything like what we are experiencing. There is a measure of truth to that as our linked lives give us access to events far beyond our local environs. While inexorable suffering has always been part of the human condition, the acceleration of varied means of committing violence is stunning.

Our days are filled with shrill “breaking news” as we are pelted with information, commentary, and dire warnings. The sheer overload of cataclysmic events nearly arrests our capacity to find a sense of perspective in it all. What do the major cultural/political shifts call our seminary and the communities we serve to do? I believe it calls us to sober theological reflection, that charism that is the heart of our mission as United.

Questions such as these arise in classrooms, conversations, and co-curricular communities:

1. What does our faith tradition teach us about how to persevere in tumultuous times? Does it call us to quiescence or active resistance? We examine the resources provided by the texts, forebears, and current faithful exemplars, seeking guidance from an enduring tradition.
2. How do we think theologically about a “world on fire,” as one colleague likes to call it? Do our conceptions of the Divine/human relationship need revision in light of the groaning of creation, exacerbated by the destructive impulses of human greed? We pursue truthful interpretations of the purpose of creaturely life suffused with spiritual longing.
3. Why should donors, faculty/staff, and students invest in an arduous process of human formation through a theological education? We believe United’s mission is to prepare thoughtful and wise leaders who can point beyond themselves to the sacred, the ground of being, even God.

Empowered by theological formation, our alums are instruments of transforming grace. Even before they graduate, our students are gathering communities to engage the most urgent challenges of our time. Thank you, faithful friends of this good school, for participating in this urgent work.

Faithfully yours,

Molly T. Marshall

Rev. Molly T. Marshall, PhD
President

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ARTIST PROFILE — AMY ZUCKER MORGENSTERN

by Amy Zucker Morgenstern

I had been a Unitarian Universalist minister for almost 25 years and had never given much thought to pursuing a DMin. Then I learned about United’s Theology and the Arts program. Together with the passion for social transformation that runs through almost everything at United, art and theology made an irresistible combination

for giving my vocation a new burst of energy at its halfway point. I want my art, my theology, and my ministry to draw me deeper into the needs of the world and help me be a more effective justice-seeker and peace-maker.

My DMin thesis will focus on the ancient and richly ambiguous story of the Tower of Babel. I’m exploring its issues of language



UNITED CELEBRATES THE WILSON YATES CHAIR IN THEOLOGY & THE ARTS AT FALL CONVOCATION

September, 25, 2025, was a resplendent autumn afternoon as members of the United community gathered in the chapel and online to celebrate the newly endowed Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts.

The chair's namesake, Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates—President Emeritus and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religion, Society and the Arts (1967–2005)—cast a vision for the arts, urging current and retired faculty, staff, trustees, alums, and students to see the relationship between the arts and theology as essential. “The arts enable us to receive and shape the contours of our shared faith, and through them, encounter the spiritual questions of who we are and what is our purpose for being on this earth,” Wilson said in his address.

President Molly T. Marshall, welcoming attendees, offered a personal reflection on her role as a successor of Wilson's and, now, as a close friend. “It's a wonderful thing when former and current presidents become friends. I am the fortunate recipient of your generous engagement.” She continued, “You continue to strengthen our mission, for which we give thanks. It's a day to celebrate, indeed.”

We give thanks for each and every attendee, those generous donors who made possible this newly endowed chair, and for the legacy, vision, and faithful service of Wilson Yates.

Top left photo by Don Breneman.



and empire through writing and mixed-media art, and one subgenre that has particularly engaged me is that of “altered pages,” sometimes also called “blackout poetry,” in which the artist blocks out some words on a page and allows others to emerge.

This piece, *Ruins: There Are Questions*, which I made for Dr. Jennifer Awes Freeman's Arts Praxis Seminar, is one result. I began with a page of questions in a physics textbook and overlaid them with images of ancient ruins to pose some of the questions evoked by a city, now ruined, that had been the center of a

powerful empire, such as Babel—or our own. “Suppose we dispense with a center?” “How long a time would you expect to increase?” “Does this destroy us?”

Making art takes me into an indeterminate and mysterious place, where images speak to me and call me into a kind of knowing that reason cannot produce. I can only go there by letting go of control. This makes art-making an important supplement, and even corrective, to my distinctly humanist, religious-naturalist theology. It is one of the chief ways in which I practice faith.

At United, the dialogue with professors—and especially with other students, learning how their art informs their theology, and their theology, their art—has helped deepen this faith.



STUDENT CAS BURR GAINS INSPIRATION FROM UNITED'S GIFTED FACULTY & RELATIONAL ETHOS

by Diane Riggs

Cas Burr, who is just four classes away from graduating with an MDiv in UU Studies, traces his first spiritual nudge back to high school. "I was on my Unitarian Universalist church's Boston pilgrimage, and I fell in love with the history and lineage of the religion and tradition," he recalls. The ministers on the trip, notes Cas, "noticed a spark, and encouraged me to think about ministry and church work" as a possible vocation.

After high school, Cas attended Laurence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he majored in English and earned a teaching license. "I wasn't set on ministry through college," Cas admits, but I always had it in the back of my mind as a possibility." Nonetheless, he spent a year after college in New York City earning an Advanced Certificate in Social Justice from Union Theological Seminary of New York. "I had a great year...and learned so much from my classmates and professors," he says, "but I was ready to come back home and...learn in my home community."

When it came time to accept his call to seminary, Cas was grateful to find United in the Twin Cities. An alum of St. Paul Academy and Summit School, Cas calls St. Paul home and was glad to find an option nearby. While proximity is important, he was also impressed by the seminary's ethos of building meaningful relationships. "United appealed to me because of how the faculty and staff communicated with me right from the start... [I]t was clear that great relationships were at the forefront of United's mission."

PROFESSORS AND CPE INSPIRE

Cas fervently believes that faith communities are uniquely positioned to effect "positive social change," and was eager to expand his knowledge. United professors, without exception, he asserts, have not only been excellent teachers, but wonderful sources of connection and inspiration. "I have been blessed," he observes, to take classes "from the amazing Unitarian Universalist professors at United, some of whom I have known for many years."

Deep scriptural study has been another blessing. "I can't say enough about both my New Testament and Hebrew Bible courses," Cas exclaims. "Immersing myself in scripture is something that I feel so lucky to have been able to do," he adds, "and it allowed me to form some of my own thoughts about these ancient texts. I am forever grateful for that."

As he works toward becoming a fellowshipped UU minister, Cas has also gained transformational insight from a Social Justice Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), led by Rev. Dr. Laura Thelander and Rev. Dr. Sue Allers Hatlie ('85, '04). "My clinical placement was at the Volunteers of America (VOA) High School in northeast Minneapolis," he notes, "where I provided spiritual care to students and staff." His learning cohort, however, met within Stillwater prison. Cas reveals, "I was in class with both free and incarcerated folks. It was a life-changing experience for me."

FLEXIBILITY EMPOWERS AND FUNDING SUPPORTS

Though Cas lives in the area, he appreciates the opportunity to take classes on campus or from other locations. "The flexibility to attend class either in person or online has been great for me," he attests. He also enjoys the ability to make community connections on campus and participate in chapel services.

United scholarships offer great support, too. For Cas, his scholarship "has made achieving my dreams and calling much more accessible, and I am so thankful to United for all that they offer." In fact, he declares, "it feels great to be at a place where the institution...financially support[s] so many of its students. What a beautiful thing."



DR. ANDREW PACKMAN LAUNCHES FORMATION PILOT PROGRAM

by Nathaniel Green

Rev. Dr. Andrew Packman, assistant professor of Theological Ethics and Formation, is leading a new initiative to understand the axes of formation for United students. The Formation Pilot Program, launched in May 2025, will "provoke year-long conversations amongst cohorts of faculty and staff as well as the student body" as they engage the central question: "What does it mean to

be a geographically dispersed theological learning community in these times?"

United has led the way in distance learning, allowing students to attend classes from virtually anywhere. Though the seminary is rooted in its St. Paul home, this geographic growth, coupled with pandemic-influenced changes in working and learning methods, has shifted the composition of United's student body toward distance learning.

YOLANDA WILLIAMS ('20) MERGES MUSIC, SCHOLARSHIP, & MINISTRY

by Diane Riggs

From an early age, Rev. Dr. Yolanda Williams' ('20) life revolved around making music. "I've been taking piano lessons since second grade," she shares, "and I started to play violin in seventh grade." She also has a well-developed talent for singing (soprano and mezzo soprano). At Hamline University, one of her undergraduate majors was music, and at the University of Minnesota (U of MN), Yolanda earned a master's in Vocal Performance. So how did Yolanda earn an MDiv and become the pastor at Fridley United Methodist Church? That seed was also planted early on.

FINDING RELIGION

Yolanda explains that she doesn't come from a religious family; in fact, her father was opposed to organized religion. Still, her parents sent the children to Sunday school at the neighborhood church, John's Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod). By age 16, Yolanda explains, there was a big change when she became a professed Christian after three pastors broke away from the Lutheran church and started a house church that became Agape Christian Ministries. In this charismatic environment, Yolanda found the space to develop a personal relationship with God because, unlike her experience at John's Lutheran Church, a relationship with God was prioritized. That was when Yolanda committed to God that she would become a preacher in gratitude for her changed life.

At Hamline University, Yolanda pursued a double major—music *and* religion. After earning her master's degree, she went on to a PhD (also at the U of MN) in Education with a

graduate minor in African Diasporic Studies. Upon finishing her dissertation, Yolanda asserts, "The Lord reminded me that I had made a commitment to be a preacher."

DECIDING ON UNITED

The day after her PhD dissertation was accepted, Yolanda was looking for a local seminary because of God's reminder. Because she owned a house in Minneapolis, she couldn't imagine pulling up roots to attend seminary elsewhere. As a worship accompanist and leader, Yolanda had been involved with several Lutheran churches and had even played at Luther Seminary services. She had also heard about United.

She approached Luther Seminary first and was told to visit the website. The contact at United invited Yolanda to visit the New Brighton campus and meet with staff and faculty. "It was beautiful," she remembers, "like an oasis from the congestion and chaos of the city." She also appreciated the eco-friendly aspects of the space, including the rain gardens and native plantings. United was her choice.

While working full-time, Yolanda embarked on earning her MDiv in Methodist Studies. Because she was so busy with work and school, and more focused on theological scholarship, she did not find much time to socialize with other students. Since graduating, though, Yolanda says she's maintained contact with other United alums.

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY

"From David on," Yolanda asserts, "music has had a way of speaking to people beyond words." It can evoke emotion, negative or



positive, and has a unique power. It's also an intrinsic facet of worship and church services. She credits preachers from her teens for modeling how to be a caring pastor and apt preacher. Dr. Demian Wheeler, though, she exclaims, "had a huge impact on my life!" He is not just a scholar; he is "really an excellent teacher." Yolanda explains that he organized classes so that he could both impart knowledge and collaborate with students in real time. He challenged students to think critically about theological precepts.

Yolanda is also grateful that United is such a religiously diverse community. "Having people from so many different backgrounds and spiritualities," she observes, "gave me a broader idea of who might come through the door at my church."

After years of deep scholarship, teaching, and musical performance, Yolanda is happy to be serving as the pastor at Fridley UMC. Though she gains much joy and satisfaction from the experiences of theatrical vocal performances at home and abroad, she can now admit, "There's nothing like standing in a pulpit and seeing the hunger that's before you and seeing the little light bulbs go off as God feeds the people through you."

The benefits of a hybrid model for seminary are many: United's progressive, interreligious theological education is no longer geographically limited; courses are accessible for more students than ever; online community spaces have arisen to meet student needs; and faculty can leverage distance learning tools while traveling for research, professional development, and more.

The seminary's transformative power extends beyond the praxis of education. Through facilitating dialogue, engaging pertinent questions, and forming community, students

grow and flourish. In Andrew's words, these comprise United's "relational fabric."

Andrew contends, "This is a remarkable moment in theological education, where what it means to be a theological learning community is being reimaged on the fly. This pilot program is designed to interrogate this question from across the life of the seminary, and to build up our community in the process."

Students and faculty alike are enthusiastic about the program. At the start of the

term, students were invited to apply for the cohorts as Andrew seeks to engage diverse and representative groups. Following the program's completion, he will work alongside United's Leadership Team and an advisory group to interpret the results. They will conduct cohort surveys, aggregate data, compose an assessment, and submit a proposal to the Leadership Team.

We give thanks for Andrew's commitment to each student's experience and his care for the "relational fabric" of the United community.



JONATHAN MORGAN ('00), WILSON YATES, & THE LEGACY OF A FRIENDSHIP

by Nathaniel Green

There are few, if any, alums in United's 63 years that can claim to have occupied the office of the presidency before graduating. So it is with Jonathan Morgan ('00), whose connections to the seminary span decades and run the gamut from alum to donor, trustee, and interim President—though not in that order. The son and grandson of prominent Twin Cities attorneys, both of whom he greatly admired, Jonathan spent his early years in tension between two paths. "When I was in college, I was torn between going to law school and theological seminary." Jonathan ultimately chose law school.

An alum of Harvard University and Harvard Law School, Jonathan began his career as an attorney on solid footing. In an interview with *Mendota Heights Living Magazine*, Jonathan is cited as having followed his tenure at his father's firm in the Twin Cities—Briggs and Morgan, P.A. (now Taft Law), where he met his wife, Martha—by working in the Minnesota Attorney General's office. Still, the deeper he waded into legal work, the stronger the pull toward seminary became.

Jonathan's foray into theological education began in his role as a trustee. "It was in the 1970s," he recalls, "that Virginia Brooks on the United board was responsible for inviting me to serve on the board of directors, which I was very happy to do." He began serving as a trustee in 1988, and in 1994, he stepped away from practicing law and answered the call to enroll at United.

"One day," Jonathan remembers from his time as a student, "President Ben Griffin called me into his office: 'Would you be willing to serve as Interim President upon my departure?'" With the stipulation that it was indeed temporary, Jonathan graciously accepted and served as Interim President from 1995 to 1996. "I had that wonderful year in that capacity," Jonathan reflects, "And of course, at that time, I got to know Wilson Yates very well." In 1996, after Rev. Dr. Wilson Yates was named President, he asked Jonathan to serve as Vice President of Development. "I was very happy to do that," Jonathan shares. He graduated from United in 2000 while also serving as Vice President."

For the ensuing nine years, I served as Vice President of Development and Stewardship, and Wilson served as President." Jonathan fondly recalls that the pair became quite close—"not only in our work for the seminary, but also as great friends." As a team, they were highly effective, sharing meals with countless donors, successfully raising support for two capital campaigns, not only advancing the seminary's mission, but also enjoying "the journey as friends who were able to be inspired to do what we did." The closer they

became, the more Jonathan's esteem for Wilson grew. "I came to admire Wilson not only as a theologian, but as a scholar and a teacher." Thus, when the announcement was made that a chair was to be endowed in Wilson's name, it was—for Jonathan and Martha—an enthusiastic yes. Alongside other faithful friends and alums, the Morgans pledged money to help establish the Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts. They also wrote United into their will, ensuring that the legacy of their friendship and Wilson's impact on Jonathan extends far into the future.

Jonathan celebrates Wilson as a "pioneer" in the field of theology and the arts, and its application for churches and religious life. In Jonathan's view, Wilson "stands as the founder and the foremost advocate and illuminator of the relationship between religion and the arts." He contends, "That has been a blessing not only for the seminary, but for the wider religious community." Jonathan's commitment to United and support for this new Chair reflect his belief in the relevance of progressive theological education. "[United] and its graduates are in an excellent position to be a force for good in a nation which is struggling for renewed hope and direction." It is Jonathan's "hope and prayer that United will continue to reflect God's summons that we may be a force for concern and love for those whom we are privileged to serve."

We give thanks for Jonathan and Martha's enduring legacy of support for and involvement with theological education at United.



UNITED DMIN STUDENT AWARDED A 2025 HAWKINSON FUND SCHOLARSHIP

by Diane Riggs

Earlier this year, DMin student Emmanuel Alade received a Hawkinson Scholarship in recognition of his dedication to social justice, peace, and transformation through active ministry. Made possible by the Hawkinson Fund, newly embedded as a program of United's Leadership Center for Social Justice,

scholarships are awarded to students like Alade who demonstrate a commitment to peace and justice. Ordained in Nigeria as an Anglican priest in 1999, he has since worked as a preacher, a church planter, and the founder of a mission training school known as Global Kingdom Harvest Institute. Institute graduates engage communities

A MESSAGE FROM ADVANCEMENT

REV. DR. CINDI BETH JOHNSON

Dear Friends of United,

In the last four years, United has celebrated the endowment of three new chairs. Last month, we formally celebrated the newly endowed Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts. In 2024, we celebrated the Sophia Chair in Religious and Theological Studies, endowed by Keith and Mary Farrell Bednarowski. And, in 2021, we celebrated the Johnson-Fry Chair in World Religions and Intercultural Studies, endowed by Andrea Johnson and David Fry. A theological school is only as strong as its faculty; adding these additional chairs allows United to attract and retain outstanding faculty members now and in the future.

These new chairs join three previously established faculty chairs. The McVay Chair in Christian Ethics was established by M.D. and Mary McVay through the McVay Foundation in 1999. The Harry C. Piper, Jr. Chair in Biblical Interpretation was established by a gift in 1998 from the Piper Family Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation, in memory of Harry C. Piper, Jr., who graduated from United in 1974 with a Master of Arts degree. The Paul K. and Mary L. Schilling Chair in Church and Economic Life was established through a gift from Paul and Mary in 1992.

We give thanks for the generosity and wisdom of all of these faithful supporters, each of them ensuring that these faculty chairs will be available in perpetuity and will draw gifted faculty who will bring classrooms (onsite and online) alive for their students. The impact of

these donors has been significant and will continue to be significant for years to come.

As an Advancement Team, we are shifting our focus toward endowed scholarships. Student debt presents an equity crisis, particularly for students who seek theological education and, later, pursue lower-paying, faith-based, or nonprofit vocations. We want students to be free

**IT IS *imperative*
THAT WE LOWER
EDUCATIONAL DEBT
FOR STUDENTS BY
INCREASING UNITED'S
ENDOWMENT FOR
SCHOLARSHIPS.**

to pursue their callings. It is imperative that we lower educational debt for students by increasing United's endowment for scholarships. By better meeting the material needs of our students and their communities, we more fully live into our mission.

When I look in the eyes of our students, I see the impact of friends and alums who support our mission. Whether you have supported the United Fund, given money for scholarships, have a legacy plan, or were one of the seventy-five donors who came together to



endow the Wilson Yates Chair in Theology and the Arts, your gifts matter. You are making a difference in our students' lives and in the communities they will serve.

With gratitude,

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

Rev. Dr. Cindi Beth Johnson
Vice President for Advancement

**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.

with "holistic social justice projects" that may involve forging relationships between church and community leaders, developing solar-powered light and water pumping stations, and/or promoting STEM subjects in school.

Alade also earned an extra MDiv and MA along the way. In 2023, he found the Social Transformation program at United. Of his experience in the DMin program so far, Alade writes, "The courses done so far have enhanced my ministerial worldview, skills, and impacts with more fruit." The Hawkinson

Scholarship, he says, "confirms that I am in God's plan."

Through his work at Global Kingdom Harvest Institute, Alade sees hopeful promise in sustaining the projects to secure better outcomes for future generations. He adds, "We hope that through our ministries, many people and justice workers will be raised as Apostles of transformation in rural and unreached communities."

For the convergence of his DMin work and the Hawkinson Scholarship, Alade is deeply

appreciative. "I am so privileged to be a student of this life and society-transforming citadel of Christian Seminary, and really grateful to God for this and for giving me the grace to be a Hawkinson Scholar this year." Congratulations to Emmanuel Alade for his transformative and uplifting ministry!

STAY CONNECTED

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New & Noteworthy

REV. DR. TANYA SADAGOPAN ('21) BECOMES MN UCC CONFERENCE MINISTER

by Nathaniel Green

On August 12, 2025, the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ (MN UCC) and its Search Committee elected Rev. Dr. Tanya Sadagopan ('21) as its new Conference Minister. An adjunct faculty member and alum, Tanya assumes her new role on November 3, and she credits her education at United as having helped prepare her for Conference ministry.

While considering enrolling at United, Tanya was facing a spiritual crisis. "I was parched in my work as a minister," she recalls. "There was a woman in one of my churches who noticed I was holding something back." The woman offered an encouraging word: "You could be fierce." Seeking

refreshment in her vocation, Tanya enrolled in United's DMin program. "Once I started at United, I jumped fully in.... It was so worth it."

While initially unsure about which specialty she desired to pursue, her coursework and the relationships she built with faculty and her fellow students helped narrow her focus. Tanya says, "I discovered, shockingly, of course I'm a public theologian!" She graduated in 2021 with her DMin in Public Theology. She reflects, "United's DMin program gave me what I needed to become a more centered and effective leader for publicly speaking on matters of justice, race, environmentalism, and bridging cultures and religions." Her experience helped her become a "fierce, powerful, effective leader," and her dissertation was published in January 2025 as a book titled *From Outlaw to In-Law: How Multicultural Interfaith Couples Can Become Agents for Social Change*.

As she prepares for her new call, Tanya believes communities across the country need deeper connection and "relationships of depth across difference"—a reality that dovetails with her

research. "Theological education," Tanya believes, equips people to be more effective leaders in complex times. She believes the tools and resources she received at United will enable her to support ministers, leaders, and organizers.

"I care so much about people in ministry who become thirsty and don't have any other well to go to," she avers. She sees her calling at the MN UCC as helping to heal wounds, bridge differences, and cultivate compassion among the many members of the Conference. "I feel blessed, humbled, and privileged to be invited into this conversation at the MN UCC."

As for how she will inhabit this new call in her vocation, Tanya is clear-eyed. "Joy [and humor are] really important to me," she says. "Joy, connectedness, relationships—we can't do any of this work without being deeply grounded and having access to joy."

For Tanya's joyful ministry and advocacy, we offer our deepest celebration and gratitude.