WHICH WAY NEXT?

STH, the Church, and humanity step into a time of uncertainty. Alums and faculty discuss positive steps forward.
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I wanted to build on a vision that with an inspiring vision for STH. What was that vision?

I found a faculty and student body who were motivated to do that in the future and, when I visited BU, I asked myself what I already facing major issues related to the rapidly changing student population and rapidly changing church and faith communities. The school was already facing major issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity; that continued, but we had a very clear direction we wanted to go: to embrace fully all people. The same could be said of racial tensions, which have risen enormously during the last 11 years in our country—and especially in the last four years. Global warming has become increasingly obvious and the ecological passion of the school has continued to grow. In all of these areas, every step we make awakens us to things we haven’t faced yet, ways we have not gone far enough.

In the face of so many threats, how do you tackle current challenges while also maintaining a long-term outlook?

STH now uses the tagline “Make History.” What does “history” mean to you?

I understand history as a movement in which all of the past continues to influence the present and will influence a future. So engaging with the movement through history is a way of engaging with what’s already dwelling within us. And if you see the history as moving into the present, and the present as setting the way for the future, then movements continue through time, continually changing.

Thinking of this as an ongoing process is a very important perspective when you’re working toward social and personal transformation. Because, if you think that people can transform the world into a completely just, compassionate, and inclusive place, and be done with it, you’re fooling yourself. If you think of history as an ongoing movement, then new problems can awaken you to new depths, which awaken you to new possibilities. So you’re never finished.

Is it motivating or intimidating? It’s both. When you work so hard and you think you’ve made real movement toward greater racial justice, it’s very depressing and discouraging. At the same time, if I can accept the fact that this is a task of the human race to the end of time, then it motivates me to recognize that I can celebrate accomplishments, but never rest in them, because the present and future are always tugging us to keep moving for the sake of bettering the world, which I would call the “kindom” of God or God’s new creation.

Transformation and transformational leadership have been important themes for you. Which transformations stand out from your tenure?

The largest one is one that we’re still working on, and that is our transformation toward greater diversity in the faculty and student body. This is one of those visions that you never finish, but we have an increasingly diverse faculty and many different life experiences, ethnicities, abilities, theological perspectives, and approaches to research in our faculty and students. That is incredibly enriching.

In recent years, American society in particular has become more tribalistic. Does it feel like you’re swimming against the current by building a community that is increasingly diverse?

When you were hired, it seemed like a lot was made of your work studying feminism, but during your time here, race became a dominant theme. Was there a point when issues of race became a bigger priority for you?

Those two have always been part of my passion, as have ecological justice and conflict transformation or peace building. Those have been themes for me for at least 40 years. I don’t see one as more urgent than the other, but I recognize that I devote time in different measures in different time periods, and always in interpersonal relationship. I was focused especially on women’s life experiences and theologies for the 10 years before I came here and it’s very influential in how I work in the normal daily life of the school. I’m conscious of gender equity and gender leadership. Race has persisted as a life-threatening issue in our country and the world, as have ecological justice and sustainability. They’ve demanded a huge amount of attention in recent years, while also foregrounding gender, sexuality, abilities, and perspectival differences.

In recent years, American society in particular has become more tribalistic. Does it feel like you’re swimming against the current by building a community that is increasingly diverse?

Yes, very intentionally. I see us trying to create a counterculture that represents compassion, justice, and honest relationships oriented toward a better future. I also think we have within our community natural worries that some issues will be attended to more than others, some people will be empowered more than others, some priorities will outweigh others. Negotiating those fears and those hopes is part of what it means to be a community.
How do you see STH fitting into the broader United Methodist Church community during this time of turmoil for the Church? We are a theological school of the United Methodist Church; as such we bear responsibility to be faithful to that relationship. That includes critique, preparation of people for ministry, and building a robust ecumenical and interfaith community that can learn and work together. It also includes encouraging the development of people and their whole selves—their spiritual lives, their knowledge, their relationships with other people and with all of creation, their capacities to conduct research and act in the world, and their contributions to faith communities and the larger world. The school has been affected by the fears and struggles and violence of the larger community, so I’m very glad that we’re at a place where we can have heartfelt conversations and where people can really listen to one another, at least most of the time, and can grow from that listening. But I wish we were at a more respectful, trusting place than we are.

Do you feel like the positive trajectory is there, but you just didn’t get as far as you wanted to? Yes, definitely. We can have conversations now that we couldn’t have begun to have 10 years ago, five years ago, even two. I think we have a lot of tangible movement that you can see, in terms of student groups, scholarships, and program centers. In terms of teaching, faculty offer far more diversity in the curriculum and in individual courses, and they continually work toward greater inclusiveness in relation to their unique fields. But you have to be here for eleven and a half years to see that. If someone’s coming in for their first year as a student, it’s very easy to see all the problems. That’s a good thing, because the new people help us see things we need to see. And also they keep us humble because we know that we haven’t reached as far as we want to reach.

What makes 2020 the right time for you to step away from this job? I want to step out of the deanship when I still have high energy for the school. More important, though, is stepping back when I think the school is on a strong trajectory of vision and excellence that can continue and change in the school’s future. We are also bringing many of our shared projects and dreams to a culminating point, so they can be strong going forward. When I use the word “culminating,” I don’t mean finished—but we see. And also they keep us humble because we know that we haven’t reached as far as we want to reach.

Is there anything else you’d like to add? I think the stakes are high and the need for deeply rooted and visionary theological education has never been stronger. Theological schools carry a huge responsibility and an even greater opportunity to contribute to faith and the common good. At the same time, challenges are growing and forces are pulling people apart rather than pulling them together in our present world. I envy and value the people who will come after me. They will take up that challenge.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

“I see us trying to create a counterculture that represents compassion, justice, and honest relationships oriented toward a better future.”

That mission overrides any decision the United Methodist Church now makes. And therefore we try to keep focused on the deep-down spiritual and ethical issues at stake and how we can be true to those.

Is there anything that you didn’t accomplish that you wanted to? Yes, so much. I wish that we had reached a more respectful, trusting place in race relations within the school and within the school’s contributions to faith communities and the larger world. The school has been affected by the fears and struggles and violence of the larger community, so I’m very glad that we’re at a place where we can have heartfelt conversations and where people can really listen to one another, at least most of the time, and can grow from that listening. But I wish we were at a more respectful, trusting place than we are.

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHIFTS STH LIFE ONLINE

On March 11, BU President Robert A. Brown announced that the University would switch to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Classes moved online, events were canceled, and students were asked not to return from spring break. “Discontinuing in-person instruction is a difficult decision, as it interrupts an essential element of our learning community, the interactions that occur in our classrooms,” Brown wrote. Yet within a week, STH faculty had moved their classes online and were finding ways to contribute to the broader community. Karen Westerfield Tucker, a professor of worship, helped author a guide to Christian worship during a time of social distancing. Shelly Rambo, an associate professor of theology and an advisor for the Chaplany Innovation Lab, shared recommendations and resources for spiritual care providers working amid the crisis, including in healthcare and correctional settings. “The spring semester has been full of challenges, but students, staff, and faculty have risen to them with enormous resilience, patience, and grace,” says Bryan Stone, associate dean of academic affairs.

One event that continued as scheduled—just in a virtual, not physical, form—was a retirement celebration for Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore. The event included a surprise announcement from Brown: the renaming of STH’s Community Center after Mary Elizabeth and Allen Moore. In an Easter message to the STH community, Moore cited the selfless efforts of those on the front lines during the pandemic, from healthcare workers to advocates, “The scattered School of Theology community is itself engaged in acts of compassion wherever people are suffering. . . . God is alive in the world, even in the midst of tragedy.”

For more information about STH’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for links to the resources and messages mentioned above, visit bu.edu/sth/news-media/news.

—M.C.

CHASING UNICORNS

BY RICH BARLOW

Walter Fluker rested his quest for unicorns—his metaphor for creative moments of ethical discernment—at the end of the 2019–20 academic year, when the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Ethical Leadership retired. Fluker (GRS’88, STH’88) “brought honor, teaching excellence, and critically important scholarship to the King Professorship,” says Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore. A well-known scholar of ethical leadership, Fluker oversaw the completion of five volumes of the writings and letters of Howard Thurman (Hon. ’67). “I met and studied with Thurman in the late 1970s, but had no idea that I would one day embark on this amazing journey as scholar and editor,” Fluker says. Serving as King Professor “had an aura of calling,” Fluker says. “One can never be confident that one is called and by whom, but I am fairly confident that the lots were cast in my favor on this journey and that my time at Boston University was an authentication.” Fluker spoke with BU Today following the announcement of his retirement.

(Continued from facing page)

BU Today: When we first met, you mentioned your quest for “unicorns.” Can you point to any today?

Fluker: My life has been an incredible journey of encountering “unicorns,” those imaginative and creative moments in which, when you least expect it, you are elected or called to something. The lives of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS ’55, Hon. ’59) and Howard Thurman represent those kinds of callings for me. For those who are looking deeply and listening to the inner world, I think there are unicorns in our social and political environments that don’t quite fit into landscapes of governed and regulated cultural environments. BU has a long history of producing some of these outstanding leaders whom King called “the creatively maladjusted” and “transformed nonconformists.” I will let our imaginations identify some of those recent unicorns who carry on this BU legacy, but they are everywhere, in politics, theatre, science and technology, global environmentalism, and so on. I hope that we will continue to give birth to and encourage the sighting of unicorns.

We’ve seen the rise of Donald Trump and politics of racial resentment during your time at BU. How would you assess the ethical state of America today?

Donald Trump represents the nostalgic wanderings of an American past that never existed. The rise of white nationalism is a global phenomenon and Trump is as much an instigator as he is a product of this phenomenon that is based on the residuals of colonial conquest and imperial power. I refer to this as an old ghost that continues to shape-shift into various apparitions and Trump is in most visible and vocal representative—but he is not alone. I am not sure that you can vote this American haunt out of office but we must at least try. The long-term solution is to reexamine what we mean by democracy and what it will take to reinvigorate a universal and ethical movement of presence not unlike abolition, suffrage, civil rights, LGBTQ, environmentalism, and other forces that make real this precious and precarious experiment.

What made you decide this is the right time to retire? I choose to think of this moment as a good time to move into another orbit, another place where I will have ownership over my time and be able to proceed with several creative projects that I have been working on from the edges of my professional life. I would like to devote more time to working in public and private venues with leaders who are wrestling with questions of ethics and leadership and helping, especially emerging leaders, to develop lifelong practices associated with character, civility, and community. A second involves some writing projects—prose, poetry, and public commentary. Third and most important, I will be able to devote time to family.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

A FRESH FACE FOR STH ONLINE, AND IN PRINT

For the first time since 2008, visitors to bu.edu/sth will find an entirely new design. The updated site, which launched in December 2019, is the culmination of a three-year process of planning and coding—all in an effort to better communicate with prospective, incoming, and current students, as well as alumni and other members of the STH community. Also getting a new look is the STH viewbook, a print publication used to recruit graduate students.

—M.C.
When Cristian De La Rosa arrived at STH in 2012, she brought with her the Hispanic Youth Leadership Academy (HYLA), a program she’d established at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Tex. HYLA, a summer program focused on preparing young Latinx leaders for leadership positions in their areas of study and chosen vocations. She was committed to mentoring these individuals and helping them develop leadership skills. This scholarship fund will serve to honor her service as professor of sociology of religion in the sociology department of the College of Arts & Sciences and at STH. Ammerman says, “I am thrilled to endorse this effort to support future student leaders whose gender has historically been underrepresented and who pass through the halls of this amazing school.”

Robert C. Neville Lectureship in Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion Fund

This lectureship fund was established upon Neville’s retirement from STH in 2018, to honor his unparalleled legacy after serving as dean of the school from 1988 to 2003 and professor of philosophy, religion, and theology. The annual lecture will feature both emerging and esteemed voices in these fields to edify our students, alumni/ae, and friends, and also recognize Neville’s comparative research: “Philosophy of religion,” Neville says, “...is multidisciplinary, multitransitional, and multisystematic. It will be grand to have new lectures on these themes.”

Nancy T. Ammerman Gender Equity Leadership Fund

For many years, Ammerman served as a mentor for individuals who have historically been underrepresented in leadership positions in their areas of study and chosen vocations. She was committed to mentoring these individuals and helping them develop leadership skills. This scholarship fund will serve to honor her service as professor of sociology of religion in the sociology department of the College of Arts & Sciences and at STH. Ammerman says, “I am thrilled to endorse this effort to support future student leaders whose gender has historically been underrepresented and who pass through the halls of this amazing school.”

Your gift will help provide needed funds to support future student leaders whose gender has historically been underrepresented and who pass through the halls of this amazing school.

Email sthdev@bu.edu, call 617-353-2349, or visit bu.edu/sth/giving
When BU concluded its capital campaign in September 2019, the results were historic: $1.85 billion raised. STH’s own “On a Mission” campaign also surpassed all expectations, raising $29.4 million—well beyond the $15 million goal set in 2010. Those funds reflect broad support from alumni, friends, faculty, staff, and students. And they have a far-reaching impact on STH’s ability to pursue its mission.

More than 2,800 donors, including 1,927 alumni—a 50 percent alumni participation rate—contributed to the STH campaign. “They support students and faculty in vital teaching and learning, and they generate significant research and rich contributions to faith communities and the larger society. I’d like to thank every donor for making this campaign such a success,” says Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore.

“ON A MISSION” ACCOMPLISHED
HISTORIC CAMPAIGN EXCEEDS GOAL THANKS TO OUR ALUMNI AND MANY others

STH CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS

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STH NEWS

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY FUND

Though the “On a Mission” campaign came to a close in 2019, ongoing contributions to the STH Fund are vital, especially for unendowed programs, which include:

1. Contextual opportunities, which provide support to students engaged in projects to learn from people in other cultures or to immerse themselves in their diverse ministries through Springboard Fellowships.
2. Spiritual life, supporting our vital program of Saturday reading retreats, meditation groups, and other special activities that nourish the spiritual vibrancy of the STH community.
3. Outreach to alums, which includes livestreaming of worship services, lectures, seminars, webinars, oral histories, regular e-newsletters, and our annual issue of focus.

If you would like to make a gift, visit bu.edu/sth/giving.
WITH A TRAUMATIC SCHISM LOOMING, STUDENTS AND ALUMS SHARE THEIR HOPES AND FEARS FOR THE POST–GENERAL CONFERENCE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

WE DENOUNCE THE IMMORAL DECISION OF THE GLOBAL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH ALL ARE WELCOME HERE

BY RICH BARLOW AND MARC CHALUFOUR

The United Methodist Church is likely to be cleaved in two when delegates at its General Conference—originally scheduled for May 5–15 before the coronavirus crisis forced its postponement—vote on a proposed split. This vote follows a long debate over human sexuality, inclusion of LGBTQIA+ members, and gay marriage ceremonies. Under the plan, anti-gay marriage congregations will leave and form at least one new denomination, with the majority remaining in the new United Methodist Church, marrying and ordaining gay people.

STH, the country’s oldest United Methodist seminary, might be affected structurally by a schism, says Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore. “We may have to decide how STH will align with the new structures. The mission will not change.”

Robert Allan Hill, dean of Marsh Chapel, echoes that sentiment. Speaking to BU Today, Hill said that whatever the outcome, even though he wasn’t certain whether the 850 conference delegates would approve the plan, he was certain that same-sex opponents “falsify” scripture. “How many verses [in the Bible]? Thirty-three thousand. How many of those 33,000 deal with homosexuality? Six,” said Hill, a professor of New Testament and pastoral theology. “How many of those did Jesus speak about? None. The Bible is about love and freedom.”

Focus spoke to students and alums about their concerns and hopes as the UMC moves toward its vote on the schism. Their responses have been edited for brevity and clarity.

(Continued)
What are your deepest concerns about the future of the United Methodist Church?

Odette Lockwood-Stewart: That we will forget who and whose we are. When we turn from the way of Jesus to pour human and material resources into institutional neo-legalism and institutional self-preoccupation without insight, we forget our history and God’s future. I am concerned that the radically inclusive and expansive table fellowship of Jesus will be lost in separate tables. I am concerned that fear will move us even farther from nurturing each person’s full humanity, including human sexuality.

Sally Dyck: One of my deepest concerns is that internal conflicts within the camp of full inclusion will result in a stance of all or nothing and then there will be a double-down on the traditional plan or a stalemate—both of which will be our demise. We must resolve our preoccupation with human sexuality—and that is something that most United Methodists agree on. We are stronger together in our mission and outreach in the name of Jesus.

Yoo-Yun Cho-Chang: The UMC has drifted away from the core message of Gospel due to its antiquated structure that more so resembles an imperial domination system than the true Gospel lived by Jesus Christ for full inclusion of God’s people. What I’m most afraid of is that the UMC will not wake up to the true calling to live out the life that Jesus had shown for radical love, as it continues to keep the domination system that perpetuates the status quo. If we continue to exist in the same way without taking a radical step, I’m afraid that we will continue to harm more people.

Bailey Brawner: There’s a strange image-conscious side of our denomination that is rearing an ugly head. When we care more about staying together, even when it is clear that we hurt people by doing so, we take time and energy away from the work of the Gospel, the radical, Jesus-forward justice work that we desperately need to be about. My deepest concern is that our hours and days and quadrinennias would be occupied by trying to out-quote scripture, win arguments, or make statements that exclude people, rather than including, teaching, and serving.

Craig S. Brown: The looming questions are about how many Methodist movements will spring from the current United Methodist Church. Will there be two denominations, three, or even more? Meanwhile, the pressing threat to the denomination goes unheard and largely unaddressed: the precipitous decline of local churches in the United States. This convergence of crises threatens the future viability of any and all expressions of Methodism. While the General Conference in 2020 may set the stage, it will be actions and consequences following that conference that will leave an enduring wound upon the entire Church.

What is your greatest hope for the post-General Conference Church?

Phillip Valdes: That all peoples, whether straight, queer, people of color, or trans, are fully included and embraced for who God has called them to be. The new Methodism that I imagine is one that breaks down every barrier and wall and rebuilds a space and makes certain that every person is included. I hope that we are able to find a church that rallies behind those who are marginalized and oppressed and repent of its sin of exclusion for the sake of one understanding of the Bible.

Lockwood-Stewart: My greatest hope is in Christ and in the movement and work of God’s Holy Spirit both in our midst and beyond us. When I am tempted to give up because there is no way, God makes a way—whether a surprising decision of the Judicial Council, the generous service of a Jewish mediator, a conference delegate’s vote against apparent self-interest in solidarity with their brothers and sisters. The uncontrollable Spirit of the Living God blows where it will, tumbling the illusion of control, exposing lies, empowering and liberating disciples throughout the world for God’s reconciling love and the transformation of the world. I hope there will be a Pentecostal release of mercy and justice in ministries of holy boldness across the connection.

Cho-Chang: I hope that we can arrive at the shared conclusion that an amicable split is a way to end ugliness within the Church. In the splitting process, I hope that the decisions we make are not dictated by the ugliness of greed, self-righteousness, and hatred, but rather by love and justice. For a while, I didn’t support the idea of splitting the Church because I didn’t want to lose my fellow Christians, especially the Korean American Christians who usually have more traditional views than myself regarding human sexuality. However, I think things have gotten too ugly and too painful, ultimately hurting too many people.

Brawner: That we allow God to be God. As a queer pastor, I tell my call story over and over, pleading with those who hear it to believe that I am actually called to do this work. My heart breaks for the LGBTQIA+ folks [a gender-inclusive version of folks] who are growing up believing that who they love and over, pleading with those who hear it to believe that I am actually called to do this work. My heart breaks for the LGBTQIA+ folks [a gender-inclusive version of folks] who are growing up believing that who they love and who they identify means that God cannot use them for the work of the Church. I am angry and sad and cynical, because we are losing the people whose faith is strong and purposeful and passionate, simply because we try to play God. I am hopeful that we get out of God’s way, allowing freedom and inclusion and love to speak louder than our fear of splitting up.
How do you hope the Church will restructure itself to hold unity with diversity?

Valdes: My deepest hope is that the Church restructures around the least of us. In other words, the Church needs to destroy the table that we have built for those who we want at the table and build a new one for those who we do not understand at all.

Cho-Chang: Under our current UMC structure and operation, holding unity with diversity is a lie. We only pretend that we are united to cover a deep and painful schism. Instead, we need honest unity that allows us to coexist with diversity. I hope that a new structure will ensure regional and contextual autonomy in terms of theology and polity while remaining missionally connected. This will create a space among Methodist expressions in different regions and cultures to work together under a common mission while allowing each to express their own authentic and contextual message and ministry.

Brown: I’m not afraid of schism. In fact, I believe division, in this case, is holy. My prayer is that a new structure will nurture their calls to ministry. If we are all focused on our mission, to make disciples, to follow the life of Jesus, we will still be unified, despite our new names or ordering systems. The challenge is that we need the courage to ask ourselves what Jesus is actually calling us to be concerned about.

Dyk: My hope is that we find a way to allow the majority of UMC’s members—lay and clergy—in the US and in central conferences to stay together under an umbrella of acceptance and inclusion based on the removal of prohibitive and exclusionary statements about minority with and by LGBTQIA+ persons. Biblically and theologically, our unity is not based on human sexuality but on our faith in Jesus Christ. This may mean that there is a degree of separation—those who can live under an inclusive banner and those who can’t.

What hard histories of the Church does the UMC need to acknowledge and address to move forward toward healing?

Valdes: Since the beginning of the UMC, the Church has conducted harm not just to queer people but also to people of color and women. By denying the ordination of Anna Howard Shave (1878, MED 1886) and the creation of the Central Jurisdiction, queer people have been marginalized without any acknowledgment that it must be rectified. Since Stonewall, the UMC has been denying that queer people are oppressed and that the Scripture has been used against them in Methodist doctrine and polity. The UMC needs to acknowledge the pain that was caused by the Special Session of the General Conference in 2019 and seek to rectify all the oppression that brought about the need for that session.

Lockwood-Stewart: Racism as a formative original sin in the United States, and the historical and current realities of the UMC need to be acknowledged and addressed. Our economic bondage to empire as a church, and our lack of eschatological moral imagination need to be acknowledged and addressed. Selective scriptural literalism used as a weapon to control or oppress needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Structures of community and language that hurt God’s children and that reinforce racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and nationalism are growing here and now. Our historic and current practices that do harm to the planet and to sojourners in our lands need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Brown: The crisis about human sexuality is a crisis of prejudice and discrimination. Yet, I have been in too many meetings where persons of color or women have been told that they do not know what exclusion is in the UMC since they have not been singled out like LGBTQIA+ persons. I am concerned that we have placed so much energy and effort into this crisis of human sexuality as compared to the amount of time and energy we have invested into institutional racism and sexism. These issues have plagued us not for decades, but for centuries. Not only do we need to confess our blatant discrimination of LGBTQIA+ persons, but we must also confess our disproportionate response to systemic racism and sexism. As a straight, white, male in the Church, I have benefited far too long from the UMC’s need to move forward with a transformed set of practices that bless the diversity of all God’s people.

Brown: The UMC needs to acknowledge that its silence kills people. Simply and bluntly put, we as a denomination have worked so hard to keep the peace, we have destroyed relationships as a result. We’ve spent our history turning our heads to conflict, avoiding asking the hard questions, avoiding speaking the truth with love, all for the purpose of remaining unified. The time has come for us to see the history of harm and oppression that our inaction has caused, and will continue to cause.

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AT THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM, CASELY B. ESSAMUAH HELPS BRING DENOMINATIONS TOGETHER

BY ANDREW THURSTON

Christians in Pakistan face some of the highest levels of persecution in the world: a religious minority, they often fall afoul of strict blasphemy laws or are targeted by terrorist organizations like the Islamic State. Militants have struck Methodist and Catholic churches—even a park packed with families celebrating Easter.

At the third Global Christian Forum international gathering in Bogotá, Colombia, in spring 2018, church leaders from around the world discussed discrimination against people of faith, including those in Pakistan. It’s an issue, the leaders were reminded, individual churches can’t face alone.

“Persecution doesn’t differentiate between Lutheran or Baptist or Orthodox—everyone is treated the same at the point of death,” says Casely B. Essamuah, secretary of the Global Christian Forum. “He who unites us is more significant than that which divides us.”

As secretary, Essamuah (’03) helps Christians celebrate what connects them and confront common challenges, from changing demographics to violence against places of worship. The forum hosts global and regional gatherings where representatives of the World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, Pentecostal World Fellowship, Roman Catholic Church, and a myriad of smaller denominations come together and encounter each other,” says Essamuah. They pray, listen to talks on trends in Christianity, and share faith stories, whether about an important moment in one life or in the growth of a movement.

“We’ve realized that those stories are very significant in breaking down barriers,” says Essamuah. “More often than not, people soon realize they have very similar storylines: there might have been a crisis in their life, then someone reached out to them, gave them a sense of hope. Along with the doctrinal beliefs we have, the stories are what bind us together.”

He calls the forum a safe space. “We’re bringing members of diverse Christian denominations to a table to see what is it that we have in common and whether that’s enough of a foundation for us to do something together,” says Essamuah, who’s keen to note that the forum doesn’t think of itself as an organization or institution, but as a networking platform. The goal, he says, is to encourage denominations to look beyond “the differences between us in terms of how we baptize or who we baptize, how do missions or if we do missions, how we serve communion, who can be ordained—the issues that divide us—to get people to a practical stage of a common mission and ministry.” Two churches from different denominations coming together, for instance, to serve people in need of food or working together to offer community services.

“When you get to know someone, when you pray with and for someone while looking into their eyes, it’s very difficult to fight that person,” Essamuah says.

Prayer has always been part of Essamuah’s life. As a child, he lived in a mission house—a parsonage—in Ghana. His father was a minister and, in later life, presiding bishop of the Methodist Church Ghana. There was Bible study every day and Essamuah often joined his father as he traveled the country as an itinerant minister.

By 24, Essamuah was ordained in the Methodist Church Ghana too. At 28, he won a scholarship to study theology in the United States, at Harvard. He expected it would be a short-term assignment. “I was thinking the best thing I could do was to get the best education that the United States had to offer and go back and train other ministers. God had a different plan altogether.”

Once he arrived, he found the classes dulled by talk of politics and church life dour compared to the vibrant charismatic worship he’d grown up with. “I was ready to bail out,” he says. Then he visited the historic Park Street Church, on the edge of Boston Common. There, Essamuah discovered a home. The benches were full of other migrants and the church shared his commitments to local and global mission and to reaching out to other denominations.

At Park Street, Essamuah met his wife—they later baptized
their children there—and served for nearly eight years as the church’s first minister of missions. He also recommitted himself to graduate education, earning a doctorate at BU.

“The main attraction for me to BU was Dana Robert,” says Essamuah of STH’s Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission. “It was not only her teaching style and the content she taught, but the people she brought together—she and they were more in tune with what was happening around the world.”

Given his background, Essamuah had a particular interest in Christianity’s tilt away from the Western world. By 2060, six of the countries with the largest Christian populations will be in Africa, according to the Pew Research Center. As well as influencing his choice of classes at STH, the geographic shifting of Christianity has increasingly shaped Essamuah’s professional life, first at Park Street, then as global missions pastor at Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Md.

“Persecution doesn’t differentiate between Lutheran or Baptist or Orthodox—everyone is treated the same at the point of death.”

—Casely B. Essamuah

“’When you get to know someone, when you pray with and for someone while looking into their eyes, it’s very difficult to fight that person.’”

—Casely B. Essamuah

“I was working with local ministry leaders to spread the love of Jesus Christ to families living with and affected by HIV/AIDS in Uganda, with young pastors in India planting new churches across the countryside, with a youth center in El Salvador inculcating the values of Jesus Christ to these young minds,” he says. “There’s a world out there that is desperately looking for models of faith, love, and grace in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We need to be seen sharing that with others who might look different from us, pray differently from us, or belong to a different denomination.”

When he first heard about the Global Christian Forum position, Essamuah wasn’t interested. But a call to Robert, who’d spoken at one of its gatherings, helped convince him to apply. “It’s not a job,” she told him, “it’s a calling.”

Essamuah was formally inaugurated as secretary of the Global Christian Forum at its gathering in Bogotá in 2018. He’s the only full-time employee—the organization has a part-time event coordinator, finance officer, and communications officer, but any other organizational support comes from volunteers. Next on his agenda is preparing regional forums in South America and Africa—and rearranging meetings that were postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. “We are always asking ourselves, ‘Who else is not at the table?’” he says.

Essamuah has met with church leaders across the world, from the Pope to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he says even those leading small congregations can play a role in uniting the Christian family. He recognizes that for some, joining with old foes isn’t always easy. Throughout history, denominations have argued, fought, even killed over their doctrinal differences. “But that shouldn’t stop us from moving ahead and encountering each other and seeing what we can do together, on this side of eternity, to make our world livable and full of faith, love, and grace.”

“The Gospel is forgiveness; the Gospel is reconciliation.”
A LEADER EMERGES

BY MARC CHALUFOUR

Patrick Reyes grew up in Salinas, Calif., a predominantly Latino community that’s best known for agriculture and as the setting for John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. The Salinas Valley has been called the world’s salad bowl, and Reyes (’11) spent time in its vegetable packing sheds, scooping tomatoes and broccoli florets onto party platters destined for grocery stores across the country. That was, until he couldn’t keep up. “I got kicked off the line because I wasn’t doing it fast enough,” he says.

Those packing shed days are long behind him—though Reyes’ connection to his hometown remains strong—and he now seems perfectly suited for his job. The senior director of learning design at the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) is responsible for supporting the next generation of pastoral leaders and theological educators.

The paths out of Salinas weren’t always clear to him, but a series of encounters proved influential. As a teen, a man in Moore had just arrived as dean and the principal at his Christian Brothers school took notice. He told Reyes he could spend as much time at school as he needed to. “So every day for six years, I was there from band, which started at 7 am, to whenever the last sport or yearbook finished around 8 pm.” He also spent a lot of time with his grandmother. “She taught me how prayer and spiritual life and faith life could ground me in my community,” he says.

Those acts of kindness helped Reyes focus on a potential career. At first, he wanted to help his hometown’s next generation by teaching history and religion, but then, after spending a post-college summer back in the packing sheds, he wondered, “Who’s going to talk to my community, from my community, and with my community?” A chance encounter with a Methodist minister helped him realize that he could be that voice. “After finding out that I had a college degree and an interest in religion, she told me about seminary,” he says. “She mentioned a bunch of different schools and Boston University was one of them.”

Reyes’ experience in Boston was challenging and formative. He found himself surrounded by people with a passion for the sort of work he knew was vital—social work, helping marginalized people of color—and yet he didn’t see himself, or his Latino culture, represented in the curriculum, faculty, or his classmates.

“The way that the system is set up, there’s always a cultural commute that students and scholars of color have to do,” he says of academia. “We have to ask, ‘Where are my people? Where is my history?’”

But he saw things beginning to change during his time at STH. Mary Elizabeth Moore had just arrived as dean and quickly became one of Reyes’ mentors. “Everything that Mary Elizabeth taught was just gold,” he says. “She pulled me aside in every moment where I felt like I didn’t belong, reminded me that I did, and that my work was of value.” Some of the writing he developed in a class with Moore provided the foundation for his book, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (Chalice Press, 2018). The book, which explores vocation, meaning, and purpose, and reflects Reyes’ own story of surviving to adulthood, received the Hispanic Theological Initiative Book Prize.

Reyes now sits on the Dean’s Advisory Board and in 2019 STH honored him with its Distinguished Alumni—Emerging Leader award. “I’m overwhelmed with joy to see the shift that BU has made in a completely new place.”

After completing his PhD at Claremont School of Theology and working in higher education as a program director and then as an assistant dean, Reyes learned about the position at FTE. With the encouragement of Moore among others, he moved to Atlanta in 2016. He admits his job is hard to define. He coordinates grants and scholarships, develops partnerships, and organizes workshops and conferences. But the goal is simple: giving 18-to-35-year-olds space to discern their calling. “We’re helping them think through what it means to be called to ministry in the 21st century,” Reyes says. “So, everything from pastoral ministry to chaplaincy, college campus ministries, social justice ministries—basically anything that they feel called to.”

Last year, Reyes’ job had him speaking at colleges and mobilizing to end mass incarceration. He serves on school and nonprofit boards to close the opportunity gap for Latino and people of color. Reyes brought deans and directors of doctoral programs together in Yosemite National Park to discuss how to call students of color to spiritual life and he gathered doctoral students of color for a writing retreat at Lake Tahoe. He’s partial to the beauty of California, he admits. Now, though, he must find ways to connect with those groups remotely during the coronavirus pandemic. “I’m in my element every day. I love it,” he says. “I get to bear witness to the changes that are happening in theological education—for the better.”

Photos courtesy of Patrick Reyes
By Mara Sassoon

For the last few years, STH has hosted exhibitions of artifacts you might expect to find in a big-city museum: an elaborate Tibetan religious tapestry, an ancient Egyptian canopic jar, Salvadoran embroidered textiles. The displays, in the school’s library and Community Center, have been curated by Kara Jackman, archivist and preservation librarian. She’s made it a goal to bring art into the everyday lives of STH community members, curating three to four art and history exhibitions each year that celebrate material from the school’s archives and on-loan works from artists and museums.

“I hope that during classes, the art inspires new, fresh thought from the creative sides of students and faculty,” says Jackman, who oversees the school’s archives and on-loan works from artists and museums.

“Sometimes a painting or a sculpture can actually be a sacred space to you or a sacred thing without it coming into the confines of organized religious scriptures.”

FACULTY AND STAFF ARE ELEVATING EXPRESSIONS OF ART AT STH

Jackman has worked closely with Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore and other members of the STH community to come up with exhibition ideas, often focusing on themes of social justice. The winter 2020 show In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World: Photography by Dan Wells displayed a Harvard Divinity School student’s nature photography and connected them to topics in ecology and theology. Bordados De Memoria: Embroidering Memories For Peace, on view at the library in late 2019, featured embroidered works created by women and children from El Salvador who were displaced during the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s. The pieces, which were loaned by the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen in San Salvador, were subsequently displayed at the Salvadoran consulate in East Boston.

Jackman’s efforts aren’t limited to temporary shows. In March 2019, she had stained glass windows from the former Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, sitting in the STH archives since 2011, installed in the library. The windows memorialize the founding members of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Since the initiative launched in 2014, Shenton says STH has increased the number of courses blending theology with visual art, music, and literature that students looking to go into ministry can apply to their degrees. An MDiv student can take Baroque Arts in Northern Europe or Cathedrals and Castles: The History of Art and Architecture of Medieval Europe, both offered through the College of Arts & Sciences’ History of Art and Architecture department, for example.

A year after launching the initiative, Shenton began an annual arts contest, open to all BU students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The first was a poetry contest, followed by a photography contest, a hymn-writing contest, and, last year, another poetry contest. These competitions allow people from outside the STH community to engage with the school, he says. “They are not about Christianity as much as they are about God and spirituality.” The photography contest, for example, had a broad theme: “Any place that you see God.” Shenton was delighted to see that contest draw submissions from all over the University.

STH’s library now features a stained glass window memorializing the founding members of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.
that often manifests through music,” says Kidd, worship coordinator and director of the Seminary Singers, a non-audition choir comprised of STH students, faculty, and staff. Music, he says, “is transcendent of boundaries. Wordless or not, it helps us feel and emote like sometimes nothing else can.”

Kidd began performing with the Seminary Singers as a student and, in 2011, was hired to direct the group. The choir typically performs every Wednesday, at a weekly worship service that Kidd also coordinates, although he hasn’t figured out how to continue their involvement during the coronavirus pandemic. “I love this job, because I really get to use the fullest and broadest set of my creative and artistic ministry gifts in a role that asks me to see a bigger picture of artistry in ministry and worship at the school,” he says. Kidd has also served as the minister of music at the First Congregational Church of Reading, Mass., United Church of Christ, since 2001. He says that his involvement in the Seminary Singers has shaped him into the minister he is today and also influences how he thinks about coordinating worship services at STH.

“Many people who worship God in a communal setting report that music is one of the most integral parts of the experience for them. That sentiment is certainly true for me and has been all my life,” he says. Kidd recalls feeling called by God to be a minister while he was attending a church musical in college. After that, he switched his major from music performance to church music.

Now, Kidd wants to create similarly powerful experiences for those who attend the Wednesday services. He thinks about how music can help make each service more impactful. Every time he plans a service, he asks himself questions like, “Should the choir anthem be sung directly after the Scripture is read and how might its text and music enhance how the Scripture is heard?” Or, “Should the invitation to prayer be sung by the congregation instead of spoken, and what role might that play in the overall arc of the service?” Sometimes, he considers the effect of singing the Psalm versus reciting it or whether the organ or the worship band would make a better accompaniment for a particular song. He likes to think of each service in terms of a theme, usually driven by the sacred texts used that day. So he contemplates the role music plays in enhancing the themes and stories of the Scripture—where the choir can add levity or where the organ can add drama, for instance. And in the absence of the choir, Kidd says he has students offering to share their musical talents in the online services. Kidd strives to show students the value of incorporating the arts into their studies. “Sometimes our artistic pursuits are the first to go when our lives get busy. We might say we don’t have enough time to be in the church choir, or to keep painting, or writing poetry, or going to theater, and so we might try to cut those out as an expendable. But, to me, the arts are essential in ministry and in life and they have a core place at STH.”
Humility has historically been considered a virtue in all the major religious traditions and an important trait among religious leaders. However, those of us who have ventured into ministry leadership roles—or work closely with those who have—likely know that (1) temptations toward pride and other forms of egocentricity abound within the terrain of leadership and (2) some leaders fall prey to those temptations, while others sustain or even grow into healthy forms of humility.1

Religious leaders are often expected to preach and teach sacred truths, show competence in a multitude of different roles, make transformational decisions affecting complex systems, remain perpetually available for helping with both everyday and traumatic events, and embody the spiritual and moral ideals of their communities. This multifaceted job description and the stressors that come with it can generate various kinds of self-esteem and insecurity struggles, even among leaders who start out well-grounded. So, what does humility look like among contemporary religious leaders? And, is humility really still a leadership virtue in an America that our wider world considers exceedingly narcissistic?2

The field of psychology has largely overlooked the topic of humility until the past decade, but there have been hundreds of scientific studies in recent years. I have benefited from two research grants to study humility, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, including a project on humility and religious leadership with my research team at the Albert & Jessie Danielsen Institute and Claire Wolfleitch, a professor of practical theology and spirituality studies. We have studied humility using our relational spirituality model (RSM), which focuses on healthy relational development as a pathway to psychological and spiritual growth.3

DEFINING HUMILITY IN CONTEXT
People frequently equate humility with subjugation, self-abasement, and shame, but these forms of disempowerment are actually antithetical to authentic humility. Our team has utilized a multidimensional definition of humility that includes: (1) a willingness to engage in accurate self-understanding, (2) a receptive and teachable orientation toward the perspectives of others, (3) low concern for social status combined with strong solidarity with the oppressed, (4) the ability to manage self-conscious emotions, particularly pride and shame, and (5) a genuine appreciation of the value of things beyond the self. Etymologically, the word humility is related to the Latin root humus, meaning “of the earth,” and suggests a groundedness.


to the Latin root humus or “of the earth.” So, we view humility as a kind of groundedness that includes a constructive attitude toward human finitude and the rest of creation. The topic of humility necessarily raises important diversity and justice questions. For example, women are often socialized toward false and oppressive forms of humility and punished for expressions of confidence or assertiveness. Sadly, males more easily gain credit for “humble” behaviors since males tend to score so much higher than females in narcissism. Cultural differences in the expressions of humility also necessitate intercultural competence to accurately practice humility in different social contexts. In fact, our research has shown seminary students who score higher in humility tend to also show higher levels of both intercultural competence and social justice commitment.5

HUMILITY AND WELL-BEING

We have also investigated the relationship between humility and well-being in religious leaders. In a study with 258 leaders from the Abrahamic faiths, we found humility was associated with higher levels of eudaimonic well-being—a holistic form of personal and communal well-being—and these effects were accounted for by (1) secure forms of attachment with God and (2) emotional and relational maturity. These findings held up even while statistically controlling for impression management effects of respondents (an index of pressure they may have felt to appear virtuous). The results help validate our RSM idea that humility may help buffer the stressors and narcissistic temptations of ministry while also promoting spiritual and relational health.

HUMILITY CHALLENGES AND FACILITATORS

Our research with religious leaders has also explored challenges and facilitating factors for the cultivation of humility. Leaders named a variety of challenging factors, such as receiving lots of validation from congregants, holding significant power and authority, or needing to promote the success of one’s ministry for fundraising or further employment. One minister explained, “My parishioners are gushing in praise for me, and I find it overwhelming and embarrassing—I don’t know how to handle such intense praise, and I don’t always feel I’ve done anything worthy of it.” These findings invite questions about preparation for such challenges in ministry.

Participants in our research also identified many factors that facilitate humility, such as engagement with diversity, working in collaborative teams and humble organizations, drawing on role models of humility, and a host of spiritual practices and teachings that focus on God’s role in their lives and ministries. Facilitating factors for humility included some seemingly negative experiences, such as receiving little validation for their efforts, serving alongside a narcissistic leader, or having one’s leadership overlooked as a woman or person of color. These findings raise justice–related questions about the systemic dynamics related to humility.

HUMILITY PRACTICES

Much of the recent psychological research on humility has focused on characteristic traits, which resonates with certain dimensions of humility as a virtue. However, we are currently focusing some of our work on understanding religious leaders’ practices that can develop and sustain humility, as practices are also important for all virtues. Leaders in our studies have described many different humility practices, including traditional spiritual formation practices, but also practices to encourage self-reflection, accountability to others—such as spouses, elders, mentors, therapists, and spiritual directors—and acts of service without seeking recognition. One leader explained, “[Humility] is not about putting myself down, it’s about elevating others and seeing their giftedness. In terms of practice, a significant thing is writing thank-you notes.” Another leader emphasized a listening posture of “with the person with those I am with. Listen, listen, listen, and learn.” Others described intentional leadership practices of humility, such as encouraging committees to meet in their absence or containing their voice in certain meetings to allow others to weigh in. We have been struck by the wide variety of humility practices, which include some that are restorative (keeping a personal Sabbath from work) and some that are stretching (inviting honest feedback). We have used this program of research to develop a daylong humility formation workshop recently tested with a large group of seminary students. The workshop was evaluated very favorably, and our follow-up research with participants identified relational spirituality factors that predicted the stability of humility over time. We look forward to continuing to study this formation-based approach to humility with faith communities that seek to integrate the best of spirituality with the relational realities of embodied life.6

The word humility is related to the Latin root humus or “of the earth.” So, we view humility as a kind of groundedness that includes a constructive attitude toward human finitude and the rest of creation.

Notes

The story is told that in the months preceding Spain’s 16th-century invasion of the Aztec Empire, Emperor Moctezuma II had dreams of the coming of pale-skinned warriors marching in from the empire's eastern sea. The troubled emperor summoned tribal dreamers from across the land and demanded an explanation for this most inauspicious vision. Writer Clarissa Pinkola Estés recounts the legend: "These muscled travelers, old, middle aged and very young, came before Moctezuma to tell the dreams they’d been dreaming about a most mysterious thing: The Future." These dreamers did not so much predict the future as they prepared the way for the possibilities of what was to come. More than anything, they perceived the need to prepare the way for change. But, as the story goes, Moctezuma was unmoved by the dreamers’ rendering of the future. Unwilling to envision a future different from his present, he demanded the killing of all dreamers. As another rendering of the legend puts it, “[from] that day there were no more forecasts, no more dreams, terror weighed upon the spirit world.”

The massacre of dreamers, then and now, may very well be the tragedy of a futureless world. The tale exposes the long-standing imperial desire to abolish all forms of visions for a future different from the present. Naturally, empires rely upon the status quo, the existing state of affairs, and any dream or foreboding of change is a threat. I have been intrigued by the social and political force of what I refer to as future-talk. Future-talk troubles narratives—whether religious or political—that seek to conserve that which is from any disturbances caused from that which may be.

As a Christian theologian committed to the project of liberation, I have found that the imagination of what is to come is a strong ally in challenging hegemonic power structures today. And that is because future-talk is never just about the future. More than mere speculation, our hope for the future signals something about the world, its suffering and expectations, its social dynamics and aspirations, its political configuration and plots for transformation. In fact, this is why controlling narratives about the future is a major concern for imperial powers.

In my current research project, I’m tracking how our hopes for the future have been shaped and policed by what may be termed the imperial force of finance. Financial markets rely heavily on the ability to predict, manage, and profit from future events. But, as some theorists have argued, managing the future is tantamount

to producing a version of the future. Futures, one must remember, is the name of a commodity that can be bought and sold in financial markets. As the future becomes an object for financial gain, our capacity to imagine what is to come is consumed. As the anthropologist and activist David Graeber frames it, we have before us a “vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures.”

The monetary and political power amassed by financial corporations grants them the ability to assure that their vision for the future shall come to be. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy turned into a profitable venture. It is the financial empire’s version of the massacre of the dreamers. In this scenario, reclaiming the theme of hope might be one of our best tactics of resistance. For theology, this means mining the vocabulary of Christian eschatology in pursuit of alternative forms of future-talk. As the influential German theologian Jürgen Moltmann announced in his Theology of Hope, eschatology is not the doctrine of the end of times, but the Christian vocabulary for hope. Neither an addendum to theology nor predictive speculation about cataclysmic events, the eschatological imagination offers ways to talk about the making of history and the divine possibilities therein. And these possibilities take us to the edges of new possible worlds. Theologian Catherine Keller has insightfully reminded us that “eschatology” comes from the Greek word eschaton, which means, among several things, an edge. Eschatology is thus Christian theology turned edgy.

The Brazilian liberation theologian and poet Rubem Alves suggests that the language of hope stretches the human imagination into the future, not as an escape from the present but as a protest against it. In Alves’ theopoetics of liberation, human hope connects us to the pain of the world while also resisting the causes of such suffering. This hope is both born out of history and committed to history. For Alves, hope gives voice and name to “things that are absent.” In Latin American and Latinx social movements, this is often ritualized when the names of the ancestors and fellow fighters for justice who have passed are said out loud. When that happens, the crowd responds: “presente!” You see: the invocation of an absence gives flesh to things. In Alves’ work, this ability to actualize absences constitutes the liberating power of the eschatological imagination. When the edges of Christian eschatology meet the margins of society, hope becomes the transformative lever to trigger new worlds into existence.

As the legend of the massacre of the dreamers makes evident, dreaming of different futures is politically charged.

For powerful forces, hope is always a matter of preserving power onto the future. For the victims, hope is a matter of survival, of creativity, and resistance.

This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.

—2 Peter (3:1-2)

Imagine an elderly man reposed in a large sleigh bed crafted out of dark mahogany wood. He lies in a room lit by flickering candelabras and wears a white nightshirt soaked in perspiration. He looks up with a weak, yet inviting smile in greeting to his son, who approaches clad in a black suit and sporting a somber countenance. In a raspy voice, the father says, “The law prevents me from dividing up my estate. You are to have everything. Without your help your stepmother and the girls will have almost nothing. You must do something...you must give me your solemn promise.” The son nods his head in agreement. He commits to do as his father instructs while mentally preparing for the future. Soon, it will be his responsibility to continue the family name as the custodian of what he and his father inherited.

Although this is a literary rendering of a scene in the 2008 television adaptation of Jane Austen’s book Sense and Sensibility, the scenario of the dying father addressing his last words to his son is ideal for imagining what is happening in the letter of 2 Peter. The opening scene of 2 Peter, immediately following its greeting (1:1–2), functions as the final words of a heroic, apostolic elder—namely, Simon Peter, the “servant-apostle of Jesus Christ.” The letter portrays “Peter” as one who has spent the majority of his life in service and witness (1:17–18) to an unfolding movement of people and he now prepares to continue this work after he dies.

In a literary moment cast as looming loss and grief, the writer reminds readers of the real significance of their current situation—it is not about death, but recollection (3:1). The feeling and state of loss is potentially mitigated if readers actually remember all the apostle said and taught. For example, in 2 Peter 1:12, he says, “Therefore, I intend to keep on reminding you of these things.” Although the writer uses language that denotes ongoing existence, readers quickly realize that the time for recollection is short-lived: “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that...” (Continued)
my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things” (2 Peter 1:13–15). The letter leverages the power of memory to embolden a community struggling to understand their purpose and value as observers of the prophetic traditions (1:19–21) and participants in the work of the earliest Christian apostles who are behind them (3:2).

In the history of the development of early Christianity, 2 Peter is located at the juncture between the earliest generations of the Jesus movement in the 1st century CE and the emergence of 2nd-century Christianity with its accompanying accoutrements of rising interest in martyrologies, institutional development and organization, the rise of other gospel stories of early Christian heroes, and the unfortunate decline of female and slave equity and voice in the movement. If we follow the large scholarly consensus, the letter of 2 Peter is likely the youngest writing included in the New Testament, with its compositional date approximately between 100 and 120, placing it after the death of Peter and the entire first and second generations of early Christian leaders and members. This means the author of the letter is literarily constructed, and his expression of authority is closely tied to the tradition and identity of 1 Peter. Between 1 Peter and the Johannine letters, 2 Peter is hidden from sight. Yet its rhetorical and historical offering to studies of early Christianity should not be underestimated.

It is a unique and masterful tapestry of religious imagery, language, and meaning. It is rich with short retellings and allusions to biblical figures and moments—from Noah and the flood, to Lot, Peter, and Paul, and even the transfigured Jesus. Between 1 Peter and the Johannine letters, 2 Peter is hidden from sight. Yet its rhetorical and historical offering to studies of early Christianity should not be underestimated.

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Unfortunately, the contribution of 2 Peter to reconstructions of early Christian development and rhetoric is easily missed due to its canonical placement and three short chapters. Wedged between 1 Peter and the Johannine letters, 2 Peter is hidden from sight. Yet its rhetorical and historical offering to studies of early Christianity should not be underestimated.

It is a unique and masterful tapestry of religious imagery, language, and meaning. It is rich with short retellings and allusions to biblical figures and moments—from Noah and the flood, to Lot, Peter, Paul, and even the transfigured Jesus. Within this short letter, we encounter early Hellenistic Jewish and Christian traditions not always known by the average layperson, such as traditions about Enoch or echoes from writings of the pseudepigrapha like the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, or the Testament of Abraham, or 2 Enoch.

By reading 2 Peter with appreciative eyes and charitable ears, contemporary readers can detect the traditions the letter received and its unique reinterpretations and reconfigurations of those same traditions. It invites readers to consider where the tradition has been, where it is, and what it is anticipated to do for future generations. Furthermore, located on this side of history, contemporary interpreters may even be able to measure the author’s intuition about the community’s immediate future against the extant writings of early Christianity that follow within a few years of the letter’s composition. One can get a sense of just how good the author was at reading the signs of the time and preparing the community for its immediate future.

Contrary to what a superficial review of 2 Peter may yield, this letter is not just concerned with individual, inner sensibilities around righteousness (2 Peter 1:1; 2:5, 21; 3:13). Though many modern translations use the language of “righteousness” to translate the Greek root word dikaiosune, this theologically loaded term damns us, in Greek, the word represents social and relational righteousness and justice; to go “the way of what is just,” righteous, loving, and communal means to resist the enticing lure of other opinions and teachings that create an environment of antagonism, competition, and suspicion (2:21).

Second Peter encourages readers to grow in grace, knowledge, faith, goodness, mutuality, and love (1:5–8; 2:1). If they are suspicious of anything, it should be of teaching that encourages otherwise (3:17).

Ultimately, a major task of the letter of 2 Peter is to buttress the Christian tradition and identity in an environment of instability, uncertainty, and contention. Even as the letter affirms that the Christian escape from trial and danger is near, it reminds readers of the scriptural, liturgical, and ethical resources already present among them to support their ongoing presence in the world, navigate its corrupt institutions, and remain mindful of corrupt influencers among whom they currently exist—at least, for now. In this way, 2 Peter invites us to also stand at the bedside of Peter and heed these last words of recollection and warning. We remember the stories of old—both honorable and shameful—and we reflect on their significance in the ages-old struggle between good and evil, justice and injustice, and life-giving or life-taking actions of humans so that we, too, might be found flourishing “in peace” with God and with each other (3:14).
How do we define a good life? One of the answers to this simple question, which many theologians and philosophers have pondered century after century, is that of virtue ethics. The classical Western virtue ethics, based on Aristotelian and Thomist traditions, attribute the principle of morality to the objective and superior goodness. It means that the ideal of goodness sets the ultimate value of human life. Classical virtue ethicists viewed that the telos—or purpose—of the human is living a life in accordance with the superior good, which is what happiness, or eudaimonia, means. The morality proper, in this account, is understood as a person’s lifelong cultivation of virtue that is relevant to this superior good, so that one can live a life as in accordance with the superior good as possible.  

What if, however, people’s capacity to cultivate such virtues necessary to flourish has been enervated by historical or systematic circumstances? The more complicated and diversified our world has become, the more challenges we face in virtue ethics. For example, feminist ethicist Lisa Tessman, in Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), recognizes that classical virtue ethics do not attend that oppression interferes with the ability of the oppressed to cultivate virtue and to achieve moral good. The oppressive external systems render the oppressed to develop a set of harmful character traits that come with a moral cost to the bearer of those “burdened virtues.” Tessman contends feminist ethicists should consider the issue of human flourishing, but should also pay “particular attention to systemic barriers to human flourishing that have been created by conditions of oppression.”

The national rendering of history in Korea draws the nations, such as the two Koreas, the Japanese empire, the United States, as the sole agents of its colonial history. By doing so, it has intentionally and effectively concealed the destructive impacts of colonial occupations on the Korean people. Local narratives of survival and resistance have been silenced. So many deaths, disappearances, and other physical and mental damages are unheard and unrecognized. On the contrary, we are constantly reminded how humiliating our past has been and how marvelous the West is and how it saved us. In the vacuum of narratives of the lives and deaths of the generations before us, we grew up as an intellectually and spiritually uprooted and dislocated generation.

For my generation, there is a go-to moral script: that of freedom and autonomy. The US military, which utilized and fortified the same governing and regulating
colonial system established by the Japanese empire—which slaughtered thousands and thousands of civilians during and after the Korean War—has presented itself as the savior of the nation, the guardian and protector of freedom, peace, and prosperity. It demands allegiance to itself as something superior and inevitable, by demonizing North Korea and by constantly comparing their destruction to the miraculous and glaring growth of the South under more than 25 years of authoritarian rule supported by the United States and its anti-communist propaganda.

The production of historical narratives, images, and cultural artifacts constantly reminds us how those Western ideals of freedom and autonomy—and only these ideas—can pull us out of our humiliating and shameful colonial past. We are indoctrinated with a very particular moral script that would make us autonomous so that we can escape the trap of the painful past.

Postcolonial theology is a set of discursive practices that critically explicates these problems of colonial discourses and their operations. In particular, Asian feminist postcolonial theologians demonstrate that the complexities in race, ethnicity, class, culture, religion, and language in Asian postcolonial contexts demand an interrogation of Western liberative theological approaches that often employ representational identity politics.4 When I first came across postcolonial theologies it was an eye-opening moment. It felt like all of my problems and predicaments could now be explained and fixed, so that I could finally live a “good life.” But soon I found that discursive practices of dismantling the problems of colonialism would not automatically yield both political and moral betterment of the colonized. Even though it is important to transform epistemological, moral, and theological discourse and practices that have been deeply colonized at individual, communal, and social levels, what is also necessary is a discussion about whether these agents on multiple levels possess the capacity to initiate and to fulfill such a transformation. As Tessman points out, we need to take “the difficulty, or even impossibility in some cases of the transformation of character” seriously.5

It is a slippery argument that the colonized are morally damaged or they are inclined to do bad things. It can be easily misconstrued as denying the agency and idiomsyncrasy of the colonized, as if all colonized are destined to be diminished in their moral capacities. Yet, disregarding damages done to moral characters and abilities of the colonized cannot be a solution for decolonizing theology. In order to envision a reparative future in which the colonized can fully flourish, it is necessary to assess first whether the colonized agent is capable of undertaking the reparation and, if not, how we can develop that capacity at an individual and social level. A good life, namely human flourishing, can only be imagined under the social, political, cultural, and psychological conditions that allow and foster moral agents to cultivate their capabilities.  

The production of historical narratives, images, and cultural artifacts constantly reminds us how those Western ideals of freedom and autonomy—and only these ideas—can pull us out of our humiliating and shameful colonial past. We are indoctrinated with a very particular moral script that would make us autonomous so that we can escape the trap of the painful past.

4. This section is revised from the author’s approved dissertation prospectus.

LOVE PERSISTS
Rereading a parable of love and justice
BY ASHLEY RENEE JOHNSON ('17)

Love. Love is. Love is persistent, love is wide. It does not hoard, it does not withhold, it is not limited. It does not exclude others, it is not some silly ethic that’s just for the weak or faint of heart, it is not harmful, it does not keep what is good, what is just from another. Love does not come easy, but it does graft us together; it keeps us close and it keeps us alive. It always includes, always fights, always fuels, always wins, always is.1

And, justice. Justice is love. Justice is what love looks like in public. Justice is love in one of its loudest, sturdiest, truest, most courageous forms. Justice ensures that life, abundant life is accessible to all, ensures that we can all “live fully and well.”2

And, justice. Justice is persistent. Justice requires that we persist. Justice requires that we look beyond ourselves, beyond our needs, beyond what’s familiar, beyond what’s easy, beyond what’s convenient, beyond our limited understanding of the will of God, and determine to continuously fight for “what is loving and caring for all creation.”3

And if God is love, then God is also justice. Which is to say that justice is the essence, the nature, the foundation of God’s very being. In the beginning was justice, and justice flowed from God, and justice was God.4 And, whoever does not pursue justice, whoever does not do what is loving and caring for all of creation does not know God in God’s fullness.5

The parable found in the 18th chapter of Luke’s gospel is a story that begs that we know intimately how love and justice persist.6 In this parable, there are two characters: a judge who is directly characterized as unfit and unjust, and a widow who repeatedly demands to be given what she is owed. The actions of both characters are extreme and there is insight to be gained in carefully looking at both, but it may be useful to first speak to what this story is not. Occasionally, some interpreters will allude to the judge, who repeatedly refuses to grant the widow’s request, as a godlike figure, and preach that we must wear God down with our prayers in order to get what we want in life. But, I would argue that this is a diluted interpretation of the parable that centers the individual and is a reflection of religion’s obsession with taking the easy road, worrying about the health of one’s own prayer life more than the well-being of people who are hurting or oppressed.7 Furthermore, the judge is not a godlike figure because God cannot withhold justice from God’s people; this judge, who was...
Like the African proverb suggests, to practice, in order to realize a just society work to connect hope to action, possibility of possibility and prayer is the doing of the posture of possibility. Prayer is a posture whether its meaning is justice or prayer, is not to say that this is not a parable forces of evil that delay the flow of justice. Withhold justice, God cannot withhold this woman, refused to do so. God cannot in the position to do what was right by her "wrapped flesh around the prayer she prayed, her prayer was embodied, "When you pray, move your feet." The woman in this parable was persistent. We know she was probably struggling against poverty, we know that being without the support of her husband meant she was among the most vulnerable in her community, we know that if she had any grievances she could only be represented by a male in public, and we know she was human. Which is to say that she was not smarter, stronger, more spiritual, or more equipped for doing the hard work of justice. But, at some point she was confronted with a deep knowing—that what she needed, what her people needed to survive, had to be, and she decided to keep on doing something about it. Undoubtedly, she gave up something in using her time, her energy, and her limited resources to continuously go before a corrupt judge who refused to see or hear her. Perhaps she was driven by a fear of homelessness or starvation, maybe she was driven by sheer desperation or a quieter knowing that this had to be. Whatever the case, she made a deliberate choice. Beloved, we’ve got to choose, choose to persist. Like all humans do, this woman probably got to a point where she grew frustrated, where she felt as though she might as well quit. But, she kept on pressing, kept on demanding, kept on praying, and so her life preaches a powerful, powerful message that I believe something like Langston Hughes’ poem “Mother to Son.” Her life sings: Well, [child], I’ll tell you: Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. … But all the time I’ve been a-climbin’ on.11

Beloved, we’ve got to keep on climbing, keep on pressing, keep on demanding, keep on praying, and keep on fighting.

Why was the widow so persistent? What did this woman know? I believe she knew in her gut that what she had wasn’t it. I believe she knew—because she lived like she knew—that she had the right to continuously push back against any obstacles, defy any social boundaries, and challenge all ways of thinking that got in the way of her getting what she deserved in life. And, I would like to suggest that she knew that, ultimately, justice was not the judge’s to give. His inhumanity and disregard for others delayed it, yes. But ultimately, God is love and God is justice. That is, God cannot be put in a box, or kept from God’s people. Justice is an extension of God and is the manifestation of God's relentless love for all of creation. Justice is our birthright, like breath, like belonging, and we cannot rest until it comes. Like this widow, we must persist knowing that justice will one day come, because "nothing can separate us from the love [the justice] of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from [the justice] of God."12

This is what I believe to be true. Life is hard and we are living in sad, difficult times. Most of us devote almost all of our energy to trying to get in step with the unpredictable rhythms of our own lives and we’re pretty exhausted. The troubles of this country and the loneliness in the world can weigh us down and squeeze the hope out of us. We may or may not regularly find ourselves before judges, but wherever we find ourselves, whatever communities we find ourselves in, we’ve got to fight to create communities marked by love and belonging. What I’m talking about here is cultivating a love ethic in our own lives” that seeps into our communities.13 This is not easy work. But, if we persist in this broken world to secure the love, the justice that ours, suggests one day come because love is persistent, love is wide. It does not hoard, it does not withhold, it is not limited. It does not exclude others, it is not some slyly ethic that’s just for the weak or faint of heart, it is not harmful, it does not keep what is good, what is just from another. Love does not come easy, but it crafts us together, it keeps us close and it keeps us alive. It always includes, always fights, always fuels, always wins, always is. And justice is love. So, go forth and fight for it. Amen.

12. Romans 8:38 (NRSV).
DO JUSTICE, LOVE KINDNESS, WALK HUMBLY

A GRATEFUL FAREWELL TO STH

BY MARY ELIZABETH MOORE

I remember my interview with STH. Students’ energy was palpable. They wanted to know, first of all, where I stood on sexual orientation and gender identity. The faculty wanted to know who I was, what I cared about in theological education, and how I would lead. They spoke their values of academic excellence, concerns about race and racism, and visions for an intellectually rigorous and just, caring community. I was hooked! Shelly Rambo walked the campus with me, Dana Robert and Dale Andrews talked plainly over dinner, and Kathe Darr loaned me her earrings when I lost one of mine. I also met inspiring BU leaders, hearing their passions for building knowledge and addressing global concerns. Already, I saw justice and kindness.

When the moving truck arrived in Boston on January 2, 2009, ten STH faculty and administrators worked in shifts to help my family unpack boxes and make home, while nibbling donuts. We were overwhelmed by their kindness. Meanwhile, students helped me shelve books in my office and told me about their lives. And then the meetings began, where I listened and learned. I soon had two realizations: STH folks had big dreams and expectations that no dean could fulfill in a lifetime, and yet STH folks had in themselves the visions and capacities to reshape the school in the ways of their dreams. Together, we would face the challenges of justice and kindness.

These challenges run deep in history. Micah portrays visions of swords into plowshares and people sitting together (4:3–4) amid threats of destruction. Micah’s people lived on the edge of disaster, seeking the edge of hope—a meaningful image as people now teeter on the edge of despair before COVID-19, dysfunctional systems of public support, unjust distribution of healthcare, and the terrifying vulnerability of peoples on US borders and in prisons, nursing homes, and crowded neighborhoods. Yet, Micah turned his people to God: “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (6:4). In Micah, God listens, speaks, and calls people to act.

The same God travels with STH as we seek, succeed, and fail. I have been privileged to witness STH, near and far, as you practice justice, mercy, and humility, and I will be forever grateful. From you, I learn that living on the edge is a place where God dwells, and it requires the impossible possibility to do justice, love kindness, and travel humbly with God. Thank you for being you!
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