INSIDE Can simulations predict religious violence? | The rich Methodist tradition of camp ministry | How chaplains can serve a changing student population

focus

Boston University School of Theology

2025

Reimagining Ministry

New strategies for healing a hurting world

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

contents

8

Songs. Prayers. S'mores.
Methodist camp ministry is alive and well in New England

14

Online Study, Real-Life Transformation
Students effect community change

20

Church for Everyone Else
Inclusive services redefine what worshipping communities look like

24

The God of New Things
A theology for when despair surrounds us

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

2 STH News
Simulating religious violence, refreshing a sacred music degree, and more

24 Journal
Spiritual seeking beyond the walls; a charge to become "watchers at the gate"

32 Alumni News
News and notes from you, including books and awards

36 Reflection
The power of lament

Boston University School of Theology 2025

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COVER: ALEX NABAUM

Courtesy of Camp Aldersgate, Kelly Davidson, Tony Luong, Shutterstock

Jackie Ricciardi

A Strategy for Now. A Strategy for the Future.

The vocation of theological education and of the School of Theology in particular—*to equip religious leaders for the current challenges of our day*—is more important than ever. The School of Theology's strategic plan is one key expression of this vocation, positioning STH as a global, visionary, and public leader in theological research and teaching, and the formation of religious leaders and scholars. The world is in crucial need of wise and courageous religious leaders who embody a profound heart for social justice and deep love of all living things. There is a deep hunger for leaders who live this out in daily acts of compassionate daring so that—step by step—a more just, loving, and peaceful world might become an increasing reality.

The five priorities of our strategic plan lean into STH's aspirations to a) lead the way in research, teaching, and leadership formation; b) cultivate transformational leaders who balance traditional knowledge with innovation and compassionate listening; and c) model a commitment to seek peace with justice in a diverse and interconnected world.

Transformative Research: As a school embedded in an R1 research university, STH faculty pursue excellence in scholarship, intellectual curiosity, ethical research, and practical applications—seeking transformative possibilities amid changing academic, ecclesial, and social contexts.

Socially Responsive Teaching and Programs: Attending to the evolving nature of religious leadership, STH supports using theological education for a wider variety of professional goals.

Commitment to Racial Justice, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: STH will distinguish itself as a theological leader in addressing systemic inequalities and injustice and fostering a diverse community of inclusion.

Flexible Curricular Offerings: STH will pursue strategic hybrid and online offerings for greater affordability and accessibility to theological education and formational communities, evident in our new curriculum and plans to launch an online MDiv in fall 2026.

Financial Sustainability: STH will strengthen administrative structures to secure keystone programs and faculty lines while amplifying our commitments to hospitality, accessibility, and ecological justice.

The stories in the following pages showcase students and alumni who are expanding imagination of what one does with a theological degree. These brave individuals are guiding communities of faith for those who've experienced religious trauma and exclusion (page 20), ministering to young people in body and spirit through Methodist summer camps (page 8), and advocating for the rights of poor and unhoused people amid their online studies at STH (page 14). STH-trained leaders are providing direction to the spiritually questioning and building more inclusive churches (page 32).

Thank you for paying attention to what we are up to here at the School of Theology. The work of theological education is as vital as ever.

If you have ideas, feedback, or stories of STH alumni touching the world in fresh and impactful ways, send me a note at **gspak@bu.edu**. I want to hear from you!

G. Sujin Pak

Dean G. Sujin Pak

Scan here with your smartphone camera to read the School of Theology's 2022–2030 strategic plan

RELIGION & TECHNOLOGY

Can Computer Models Predict Religious Violence?

A new documentary from STH professor Wesley Wildman and filmmaker Jenn Lindsay (GRS'18) details quest to simulate the actions of religious extremists

Wesley Wildman was as stunned as the rest of the country at the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, committed as retaliation for US wars in Muslim countries.

Wildman, a professor of philosophy, theology, and ethics at STH, says the nonprofit research institute he directs, the Center for Mind and Culture, had been studying religious extremism for some time. "What the marathon bombings did was catalyze this awareness that so much of what we do as professors is not very effective" in predicting when and where violence can erupt, says Wildman, who also is a member of BU's Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences. "If you work in the humanities, it can be difficult to actually have a direct effect on anything."

Shutterstock

"The sorts of things we discover from our computational simulations are the conditions under which extremism can lead to violence—where the tipping points are." — Wesley Wildman

His quest to help policymakers craft "better projections about what's likely to happen" led him and an international team of researchers, funded by the John Templeton Foundation and Wildman's Center for Mind and Culture, on a three-year research project. Their goal: simulate, with computers, the conditions under which societies' religious extremists might turn violent. As part of the work, Wildman recruited filmmaker Jenn Lindsay (GRS'18), an acquaintance from her time at BU studying for a PhD in the social science of religion. Lindsay shadowed the BU researchers to Virginia, Norway, and refugee camps in Lesvos, Greece.

The resulting documentary, *Simulating Religious Violence*, premiered for a sold-out crowd November 19, 2024, at BU's Duan Family Center for Computing & Data Sciences during STH's Fall 2024 Lowell Lecture. After the screening, Wildman moderated a panel discussion featuring Lindsay and F. LeRon Shults, a Norwegian professor of theology who was in the film, along with three BU scholars who weren't part of Wildman's research but are interested in religious violence and peacemaking: Yair Lior, a College of Arts & Sciences senior lecturer in comparative religion, Judaism, and Chinese philosophy; Nicolette Manglos-Weber, an STH associate professor of religion and society; and James McCarty, an STH clinical assistant professor of religion and conflict transformation. Not long before this event, the film debuted overseas at Italy's Religion Today Film Festival, and shortly after it had a West Coast premiere in San Diego.

As part of the three-year research project, Wildman and Shults coauthored a book in June, *Modeling Religion: Simulating the Transformation of Worldviews, Lifeways, and Civilizations* (Bloomsbury, 2024), about how they use computers to study faith's role in seismic cultural shifts dating all the way back to the Neolithic Revolution.

Dave Green

STH's Wesley Wildman, in a scene from *Simulating Religious Violence*, is a philosopher of religion, an ethicist, and a member of the University's Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences.

"The sorts of things we discover from our computational simulations," Wildman says, "are the conditions under which extremism can lead to violence—where the tipping points are." The size of opposing factions in a conflict is one clue. "When it's close to 60-40, you have a much higher risk of religious extremism tipping over into violence," he says. At 50-50, there is a tense equilibrium, but at 60-40, both minority and majority anxieties are heightened, Wildman adds.

Another clue is to understand violations of people's sacred sensitivities, he says. Attack what people consider sacred and they take it personally, after which trying to negotiate peace feels like a disgusting compromise of treasured ideals.

In the film, Wildman describes his research team's ultimate goal: "I want someone who was going to blow themselves up to decide not to blow themselves up, because they've got some other vision of the way life can be, or because they read an article that convinced them that there are other ways of protesting unjust situations." —*Rich Barlow*

SACRED MUSIC

A Refresh for a Melodious Master's

The Master of Sacred Music, with two new faculty appointments, supports diverse student interests

Shutterstock

Music is an impactful part of worship, and STH's Master of Sacred Music program is training a new generation of faith leaders to be holistic performers, scholars, and educators. The two-year MSM program, offered jointly through STH and the College of Fine Arts School of Music, has two tracks: choral conducting and organ.

Two new faculty members have recently brought their expertise to each of these tracks, elevating the program: Daniel Parsley, assistant professor in choral conducting and director of choral activities, who holds appointments at both STH and CFA; and renowned organist Erica Johnson, an adjunct instructor of organ.

"With Daniel and Erica, the program has a good infrastructure to support really diverse student interests and levels of inquiry," says Andrew Shenton, director of the MSM program and a professor of music who is also an organist and a choral conductor.

Johnson received a Doctor of Musical Arts in organ performance from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music and plays in hundreds of church services each year. She also teaches organ and harpsichord at Wellesley College and is the college's organist.

Through BU's School of Music, Parsley directs choral activities and graduate conducting programs. He also leads BU's larger Symphonic Chorus—comprising musicians from around the University community, including undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff—and the BU Singers, a smaller choir also open to singers from the BU community. In February 2025, Parsley and John Black ('22, CFA'27), a graduate of the MSM program, teamed up to conduct the International Schools of Southern and Eastern Africa (ISSEA) Pan African Choral Festival, Africa's primary youth music festival.

Expanding Opportunities

The MSM program has three parts. "One is practical—you're playing or you're conducting," says Shenton. "One is theology. And one is music history." (Karen Westerfield Tucker, a professor of worship, supports the program's theology-focused courses.)

Students have an array of BU resources available to them, including access to the John R. Silber Symphonic Organ at the George Sherman Union. STH is home to the organ library of the Boston chapter of the American Guild of Organists, which has a robust collection of music for the pipe organ, as well as a hymnological collection with thousands of volumes.

"There's such a large amount of music that goes on in this historic city, especially choral music." — Andrew Shenton

Courtesy of Andrew Shenton, Rebekah Kroesling

Andrew Shenton (top), director of the Master of Sacred Music program and a professor of music, and Daniel Parsley, an assistant professor in choral conducting and director of choral activities

And, Shenton says, students benefit from Boston's thriving choral music scene. "There's such a large amount of music that goes on in this historic city, especially choral music," says Shenton, pointing to the Greater Boston Choral Consortium, which includes dozens of choirs, both religious and secular.

Shenton is proud of the MSM's pluralistic design. The program welcomes students of diverse faith backgrounds. "We'll train you to be able to play for a synagogue, a Catholic service, an Anglican service, whatever you want to do," he says. "And we have a really good placement history when it comes to our students getting jobs after graduating." —*Mara Sassoon*

Manglos-Weber

Roldán-Figueroa

FACULTY

STH Adds New Deans, Faculty

Bryan Stone departs to become dean of SMU Perkins School of Theology

The School of Theology continues to attract faculty and appoint leadership who are committed to training ethical leaders working to transform the world.

In April, Rady Roldán-Figueroa was named the school's associate dean of academic affairs, filling a vacancy left by Bryan Stone, who left to become dean of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. When Christian De La Rosa announced she would be transitioning out of her role of associate dean of students & community life to focus on the Latinx initiatives she leads at STH, Dean G. Sujin Pak appointed Nicolette Manglos-Weber to the role. Congratulations to Shelly Rambo, who studies religious trauma, for her promotion to full professor at STH.

Pak calls Stone a "beloved colleague" and key partner to her in guiding the strategic plan and key initiatives of the school. Roldán-Figueroa, a professor of the history of Christianity, created an office of diversity, equity, and inclusion at STH. "Rady is a trusted and wise colleague who has shown himself to be a careful listener, a judicious decision-maker, a kind and compassionate presence, a person of profound integrity, a frontrunner of courage and advocacy, an excellent scholar, and beloved teacher," Pak says.

Manglos-Weber, an associate professor of religion and society who has been leading the school's diversity, equity, and inclusion office, comes into the role of dean of students & community life "with profound commitments to justice, beloved community, and holistic care," Pak says.

These leadership transitions follow the 2024 arrivals of noted scholars emilie townes (who chooses not to capitalize her name), the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Religion and Black Studies, and Luther Young, Jr., an assistant professor of religion and society.

townes' professorship honors King "by modeling the moral authority, prophetic vision of justice, peace, and love, ethical leadership, and global consciousness that he advocated for and embodied." The chair, previously named the Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Ethical Leadership, had been held by longtime STH faculty member Rev. Walter E. Fluker (GRS'88, STH'88, Hon.'24), who retired in 2020.

townes' scholarship has delved into many corners of womanist and Black theology, as well as social issues such as racial health disparities and environmental racism. Before becoming the first Black dean at Vanderbilt Divinity School in 2013, she was the first Black woman president of the American Academy of Religion, and the first African American and first woman to serve as associate dean for academic affairs at the Yale Divinity School. She was president of the Society of Christian Ethics, the first Black woman to hold the office.

Pak calls townes a "trailblazing scholar of remarkable interdisciplinary range," who has left a mark on every field she touches, as well as "a towering figure and recognizably the leading living womanist ethicist today."

Young, a sociologist of religion, holds an MDiv from Vanderbilt and both an MA and a PhD in sociology from the Ohio State University. He studies the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and religion with a particular interest in the causes and effects of homophobia in predominantly Black churches.

"[Young] brings in a whole set of incredible research gifts. He is a person of profound compassion and vision, able to foster joy amid challenging circumstances," Pak says.

—Steve Holt

(clockwise from top) Young, Stone, De La Rosa, townes

Dave Green

Brandon Wright, Dave Green X2, Michael Spencer X2

3 QUESTIONS

Chad Moore

After earning two master's degrees and a PhD at BU, Chad Moore ('16, GRS'24'24) returned to the School of Theology to become its director of enrollment in April 2024.

What's one thing that excited you about this opportunity at STH?
Studying at STH helped me encounter a more beautiful, more complex, and more meaningful world. As a student, my professors and peers challenged me to be part of widening our world's areas of aliveness, to adapt Howard Thurman's words. Now, as the director of enrollment, it is a privilege to invite curious, compassionate, justice-minded leaders and scholars to join STH and leave their own mark on this vibrant community of intellectual and moral formation.

What's your vision for your work with STH?
I see my role as a key part of STH's efforts to discover, educate, and empower theological leaders whose voices and witness call forth more beautiful, more just, and more equitable worlds. As such, my team and I hope to craft compelling invitations that encourage students to join the STH community and to provide them with hospitable, honest, and holistic guidance throughout the discernment, application, and matriculation processes.

What is STH doing to enroll a more diverse student population?
While the Supreme Court's dismantling of affirmative action programs in college admissions has complicated institutional access to data on race and ethnicity, these decisions don't impact who our friends and community are. The School of Theology is blessed to have an extraordinarily diverse, talented, and courageous group of alumni across the country and world. Maintaining our relationships with these folks and the undergraduate institutions from which they hail is key to continuing STH's rich history of crafting courageous spaces for theological education that invite voices from a wide array of communities to each contribute their verse. *–S.H.*

feature

Songs. Prayers. S'mores.

The Methodist tradition of outdoor ministry is thriving at New England summer camps

By Marc Chalufour

Photo illustration by Kaajal Asher-Kochhar

The singing starts at the camp's farmhouse with a group of staffers:

"Allelu, allelu, allelu, alleluia."

Jen Savoy (right) and Wanakee board chair John Whitley serve communion to staff member Abby Bryant. Savoy and Whitley have served as camp program directors at Wanakee.

Daniel Gomez

They sing toward campsite 1, in the forest across the road. A few seconds pass. Then a response comes back through the trees: "*Praise ye the Lord.*"

Campers at site 1 then turn toward campsite 2, deeper in the woods, and start again: "*Allelu, allelu, allelu, alleluia.*"

The melody reverberates through the forest as the call-and-response song ping-pongs from one campsite to the next, up a hillside and back down again before coming to rest where it started.

"Allelus" are a Friday tradition at Wanakee, a United Methodist summer camp in Meredith, N.H. They begin at sunset on the last night of the week, while campers roast marshmallows and assemble sticky s'mores. Participants call it the most magical moment in a week packed with adventure, ritual, and community. Neighbors are rumored to sit out on their porches to listen.

While congregations of every denomination struggle to attract young people, Methodist summer camps are thriving. But what does camp have to do with the church?

Outdoor and camp ministry go back to the beginning of Methodism. John Wesley practiced "field preaching" in the 1700s to reach people not attending traditional church services. In the 1800s, pastors set up camp meetings on the American frontier, where churches had yet to be established.

In the 21st century, that legacy lives on at retreat centers and camps, which provide spaces for deeper experiences than a Sunday service may allow. The United Methodist Church (UMC) owns more than 175 such facilities nationwide, including three New England summer camps: Wanakee, Aldersgate in North Scituate, R.I., and Camp Mechuwana in Winthrop, Maine.

"We don't see a lot of youth in our churches," says Alicia Veléz Stewart ('18), pastor at Weston UMC in Weston, Mass., and camp chaplain at Aldersgate. But, she adds, the three camps serve more children in a summer—nearly 2,000—than New England's 500-plus UMC churches see in a year. Those kids have the classic summer camp experience—swimming, canoeing, hiking, campfires, and bunkhouses—mixed with Methodist ministry.

For families across New England—including many from the STH community—UMC summer camps are an annual tradition. Kim Macdonald, STH's director of communications, attended Wanakee as a camper and returned as a counselor and lifeguard. Now, with her own kids becoming campers, she volunteers on the board of directors.

"Children need camp," says Macdonald (CFA'04, COM'23). "They need to be disconnected from the grid. They need to be disconnected from their screens. They should live in a world where they are all equal and they all can serve each other in ways that foster growth and maturity. It was the best week of my year while growing up, and I want that experience for my kids."

Faith in Practice

Jen Savoy, the pastor at Contoocook UMC in Contoocook, N.H., also has a long history with Wanakee. She has sent four children to the camp and has spent time at the camp every year, volunteering on committees and directing programs.

Savoy ('21) has witnessed the power of the camaraderie and community that develop as campers and staff share experiences and try new things. "Church is an hour, once a week, and you're sitting in a pew, listening to someone talk," she says. "At camp, they can see faith in action."

A camper at Aldersgate enjoys a guitar lesson.

Courtesy of Camp Aldersgate

Last summer, Savoy decided to conquer her fear of heights. She strapped on a climbing harness and made her way up into the trees on the camp's ropes course. When she reached a platform high in the trees, she "was shaking like a leaf in a hurricane." But she could hear campers shouting encouragement from the forest floor and kept going. "When we get to practice being Christians and be the hands and feet of Jesus and encourage others—show God's love to the world—that's when our faith becomes real," she says.

"Camp is one of the few places left that offers that kind of freedom and experimentation," says Veléz Stewart. "You don't have to be anything but yourself, and we can't say that all the time for our sanctuaries. Aldersgate is a place of true radical welcome, true radical hospitality, true radical love."

Veléz Stewart was a Master of Divinity student at STH in 2017, looking for a field education opportunity. While most of her peers found placements in churches, the former Girl Scout wanted a different experience. "Camping was in my blood," she says. So she reached out to Aldersgate.

Campers and staff participate in a sunset moment of reflection at Wanakee's outdoor chapel.

Daniel Gomez

Eight years later, Veléz Stewart is looking forward to another summer as chaplain. "It's a way of making faith in community accessible and not scary," she says. "My goal is to make faith—not religion, not denomination, but *faith*—accessible and authentic for our campers. For many of these kids, Aldersgate *is* their church."

Creative Ministry

Eungil Cho is a pastor in the northeast corner of New Hampshire, where he oversees seven United Methodist churches. His congregations are shrinking and getting older. Cumulatively, says Cho ('19), they draw fewer than 100 people on a given Sunday, and not many of them are children. "It's always been a concern of mine—how do I provide spiritual formation for my own son?" He found his answer at Wanakee, which his son has attended for three years.

Cho, who wanted to experience the camp for himself, began volunteering as chaplain in 2023. He leads a Thursday night service, but his role is otherwise informal. He's learned that sharing adventures with the campers, like a long swim to an island, allows him to make connections that aren't possible during an hour in church on Sunday. He's come away from Wanakee inspired by another element of camp life: mealtime.

At each dinner, kids from a different campsite lead grace and a series of songs. Cho was surprised by how engaged the kids were and was inspired by their creativity. "The religious components in our traditional church can be boring and uninteresting to children," Cho says. "Wanakee does a good job of making that very interesting by making it silly." He's brought some of that humor and creativity back to his churches, introducing classics like "Superman Grace" to his programs.

At Aldersgate, Veléz Stewart also fosters creativity. Every summer, she and the camp director design a week of faith formation that includes the biblical narrative as well as art, music, worship, and prayer. In 2024, Aldersgate focused on the Lord's Prayer, which she helped the campers learn. On Thursday evenings, the kids lead a collaborative worship. Each cabin presents their interpretations of the summer's prayer. These reimagined prayers can take any form, like works of art or camp songs.

"We are empowering our youth to be persons of character and persons of faith," Veléz Stewart says. "They're taking this kernel of faith that we have planted and nurtured so that they can live it out in a way that works for them and makes the world better."

"We are empowering our youth to be persons of character and persons of faith. They're taking this kernel of faith that we have planted and nurtured so that they can live it out in a way that works for them and makes the world better."

—Alicia Veléz Stewart

Courtesy of Camp Aldersgate

S'mores, of course, are on the menu at Camp Aldersgate.

A Spiritual Space

There's an irony in the continued relevance of camp ministry: What began in the 1700s as a respite in undeveloped areas now exists as an escape from development. For one week, kids can trade their screens and headphones for campfires and group songs. They run in the dirt, swim in the lake, and climb in the trees.

"We keep it rustic on purpose, because we want to keep the focus on being in fellowship with one another as a community," Macdonald says. "I see being able to connect with your fellow person on a deeper level as a spiritual experience."

To Veléz Stewart, camp is no less spiritual a space than her own church. Deep on Aldersgate's property, just before the main retreat center, where the forest meets the lake, is a rustic, outdoor chapel surrounded by trees. She likes to hold morning worship there. "It's one of these places where the veil between this world and the Kin-dom is most thin," she says. "Everything feels very apart from the world and, in this wonderful way, it gives the kids a chance to take a deep breath."

Savoy has seen Wanakee shape her kids as campers and staffers over almost two decades. Last summer, she volunteered as a site director for a week and enlisted her youngest daughter to help. Savoy was amazed to see how her normally introverted child emerged from her shell to help run things. When Savoy asked why she didn't do that at home, her daughter responded with four words.

"Camp is magic, Mom." ■

feature

Online Study, Real-Life Transformation

STH's Online and Hybrid Programs allow students to work for change in their communities

By Mara Sassoon

Kelly Davidson

Tien Nguyen ('26) leads and teaches in Buddhist communities in Roslindale and Brockton, Mass.

Building community gardens.

Advocating for the poor and unhoused.

Creating welcoming spaces for LGBTQIA+ people.

School of Theology students make their communities better in many meaningful ways, and the STH programs they are enrolled in help them find even more inspiration.

When STH relaunched its hybrid Doctor of Ministry in 2016, it sought to provide an advanced degree program that active religious leaders, organizers, and chaplains could pursue from anywhere while continuing to work in their communities. The three-year, low-residency hybrid DMin, which focuses on transformational leadership, is a mix of online learning with occasional intensive on-campus classes.

"What's so incredible about the DMin program is there is an immediate, real-world application that happens with students' studies," says Debbie Brubaker ('11), director of STH's Online and Hybrid Programs. "Whatever they're working on in class is often immediately relevant to a pressing question that they have." The programs include the DMin and the online Master of Arts in Religion and Public Leadership (MARPL), launched in 2023.

Brubaker adds that a hallmark of the DMin program is its diversity. "You have folks talking across faith traditions," she says. It is also STH's most racially diverse student body by degree program. "And it is a very multigenerational program. As an educator in the program, being able to be in a classroom and collaborate with folks who are at these different stages and seeing the way that those conversations unfold–it's really beautiful."

The success of the DMin inspired the creation of the MARPL, STH's first fully online degree program. It's designed for people working in more diverse fields outside of ministry–including nonprofits, business, and education–and has a curriculum rooted in public theology and leadership.

We spoke with five students in the DMin and MARPL programs about their studies, how they are balancing their coursework and activism, and how their classes have informed their work.

DeAndre Carswell ('26)

Industrial engineer DeAndre Carswell ('26) used to travel a lot for his job manufacturing airplanes and submarines. One day, he was working in an airplane hangar when he experienced the call to attend divinity school. "I just felt, hey, there is something more that I have to do," he says.

After earning an MDiv from Virginia Union University in 2023, he moved back to the city where he grew up, Portsmouth, Va., to become the senior pastor at Prince of Peace Church, which his great-great-great-grandfather founded in 1902. "The same building is still there," says Carswell, who continues to work full-time as an engineer while leading his church community.

Before long, he realized he wanted to continue his education.

"Our church is nestled between three communities that are the most violent in our state," he explains. "I felt I needed specialized training to deal with some of these things."

Carswell, who was drawn to the DMin by its focus on transformational leadership, consistently calls upon lessons from his STH courses. "Our church has been standing since 1902," he says. "Debbie Brubaker's Sacred Spaces class taught me that change can sometimes take longer in places like this—where this is all the people knew, this was the only place that was their sacred space. People's emotions are tied to those things as well."

Brubaker's class also inspired his idea for a fundraising campaign, which aims to raise $36,000 in 36 months and has already helped the church complete some renovations and start a community garden and a food donation program. "I don't want us to turn into a new place," he says. "I want us to get back to our former glory and to be able to enhance and modernize our ministry."

Kelly Davidson, courtesy of DeAndre Carswell

Tien Nguyen ('26)

When Tien Nguyen ('26) was 15, he traveled a few hours from his home in a rural Vietnamese province to Ho Chi Minh City to become a Buddhist monk. He trained in a traditional Mahayana Buddhist monastic setting for seven years. After that, he continued his studies, earning a bachelor's degree at International Buddhist College in Thailand and master's degrees at Naropa University in Colorado and Harvard Divinity School. He says the programs opened his eyes to different Buddhist traditions and changed his perspective on religion in general.

"I'm someone who could bridge the gap, reaching the second and third generations."
Tien Nguyen ('26)

Nguyen is a dharma teacher and leader at Temple Vietnam in Roslindale, Mass. He's also founded a new Buddhist organization in Brockton, Mass., which he calls "an experiment for my new way of teaching and leading."

This new way has been informed by the classes he is taking in STH's hybrid DMin program, which is giving him the tools to lead a younger generation.

Nguyen sees himself as part of a new wave of Buddhist leaders in America. "The previous generation of leaders has been busy providing care for the first immigrant generation, who mainly speak Vietnamese," he says. "I'm someone who could bridge the gap, reaching the second and third generations."

Savina Martin ('25)

Growing up in Roxbury, Mass., during the Civil Rights era, Savina Martin ('25) would often catch a Green Line trolley to Comm Ave and walk up and down the street. She'd pause to admire the School of Theology building at 745 Commonwealth Ave., where Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59) had taken a class or two. "I would look at the edifice and think, 'I would never be able to go to that school,'" she says.

But in 2023, Martin—who's had a decades-long career in activism, mostly focused on homelessness—decided to apply to the Master of Arts in Religion and Public Leadership at STH. She will complete the program this year. "So my motto is, it doesn't matter how old you are," she says, "if it's within your purpose and your calling, it will find you, keep you, and get you to where you need to go."

Today, Martin is one of three chairs of the Massachusetts branch of the Poor People's Campaign, a national organization launched in 2018 to address systemic racism and poverty.

Joining the MARPL program is "the last step in her calling," she says. It's helped her rethink how she approaches her work as an activist and public theologian.

"Every course has challenged us to reflect on how we perceive the world and its potential for transformational change toward a better future," she says. "What is working? What is not? And how will you approach changing it? The work is demanding and difficult, but this is an exciting time in history to be alive—and to be at STH."

Kealani Nunes Willbanks ('26)

She thought she'd found her purpose in overseeing church finances. Kealani Nunes Willbanks ('26), associate pastor and executive director of operations and impact at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., has added to that mission: dismantling modern-day colonization.

Nunes Willbanks, who has an MBA and who worked in finance for many years before pursuing a master's degree at Fuller Theological Seminary, was drawn to Foundry because of its background in activism and social justice.

During the racial reckoning of 2020, she was deeply affected by witnessing both peaceful protestors and the heavy military response to them. "Seeing that firsthand was disturbing," she says. "That was when I started on my journey toward decolonization work."

To begin that journey, Nunes Willbanks enrolled in STH's hybrid DMin program. The granddaughter of Filipino immigrants, she is writing her dissertation on the Filipino concept of Kapwa, which roughly translates to a shared identity and connectedness with others. The concept relates directly to her decolonization work, with its emphasis on equity and social justice. "My DMin project reclaims the Indigenous spiritual practice of Kapwa, embodied by the Filipino ancestors. I hope to offer this as an accessible resource to other Filipino clergy, reflecting the possibility that Kapwa can be a Christ-centered model of seeing yourself in others and building a generous community together," she says. "It's been a gift and healing balm to follow the voices of my ancestors. I also became a Lola [grandmother] last year. The idea that I am an ancestor to others profoundly resonates with me."

"My DMin project reclaims the Indigenous spiritual practice of Kapwa, embodied by the Filipino ancestors."

Kealani Nunes Willbanks ('26)

Alix Webb, courtesy of Kealani Nunes Willbanks

Courtesy of Edwin Perez

Edwin Perez, Jr. ('27)

The son of a pastor, Edwin Perez, Jr. ('27) wanted to follow in those footsteps since he was a child. But there was a problem: Perez identifies as queer, which was a nonstarter in his evangelical congregation. "It means I had a fair share of church hurt and trauma," Perez says.

So Perez discarded his pastoral dream. He spent a few years as a medical assistant. "I loved helping people," he says, "and that was the next best thing." He went to school to study nursing, but after taking one class on philosophy and ethics, he switched majors to philosophy with a concentration in religious studies. "That was what really opened the door again for me to reconnect with the church," he says. "I came to a more progressive and a more open church and picked back up there."

Perez, who received his MDiv from Yale, is a part-time general pastor at Manantial de Gracia United Church of Christ and a three-quarter-time senior transitional minister at the Congregational Church of Naugatuck in Connecticut.

He's been pastoring for nine years and in that time has done advocacy work around all of Connecticut and across the country. During the first Trump presidency, he participated in a network of clergy that supported families and individuals who were at risk of becoming deported.

"I've also done a lot of work with the LGBTQIA+ community, both in the Latine intersectional experience and more broadly with workshops around reconciling faith, sexuality, and identity."

Edwin Perez, Jr. ('27)

"We did all that we could so that asylum judges would hear their cases," he says. "I've also done a lot of work with the LGBTQIA+ community, both in the Latine intersectional experience and more broadly with workshops around reconciling faith, sexuality, and identity." During his tenure, the Congregational Church of Naugatuck passed a resolution in 2023 to declare itself open and affirming to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Just after finishing his degree at Yale, Perez felt he had more to learn and enrolled in STH's hybrid DMin program.

Perez, who is also a per diem hospital chaplain, says he's benefited from hearing stories of the work his DMin peers are doing in their communities and from Eunil David Cho's course, Spiritual Care and Social Justice. "I've come across more texts and more resources touching on the need for social justice to be present in chaplaincy and in spiritual care," he says. "Not only is it compatible, but there's an ethical imperative for social justice to present itself in the work of chaplaincy." ■

Church *for* Everyone Else

Amid dropping church attendance and rising religious trauma, two services—one in person and one virtual—welcome those who've been hurt by religion. They're also redefining what a worshipping community looks like.

By Steve Holt

Thursday Night Church is co-led by (above) Associate Pastor Rachel Barton ('23) and (right) Audrey Woodhams ('26), the creative director.

Tony Luong X4

Boston's Old South Church traces its roots to Puritans in 1669, more than a century before the birth of the United States. For 150 years, the congregation—which had split from Boston's Puritans over a dispute about baptism—gathered in the Old South Meeting House, best known as the site where Samuel Adams riled up would-be revolutionaries against British occupation. The church moved to its current location at Dartmouth and Boylston Streets in 1875, and today its gothic stone campanile soars above Copley Square. To whatever degree Boston has a religious "establishment," 356-year-old Old South Church is it.

But behind those old stones exists a Christian community extending a hand to those who've perhaps been wounded by established religion. For decades, the United Church of Christ congregation has had progressive theology and an open posture to all comers—LGBTQIA+, doubting, unhoused, or undocumented. A new Thursday evening service, however, packages those fundamentals in a slightly more contemporary way.

The candlelit service is in Old South's stunning Gordon Chapel, which is largely stripped of trappings like organs and clerical vestments and is centered on community, simplicity, and the table—both a communion table during the service and a shared meal afterward. A small band, led by Audrey Woodhams ('26), Thursday Night Church's creative director, plays music that is acoustic and radio friendly. (Recent services have featured songs by Coldplay and Teddy Swims.) A reflection from one of the ministers (*not* a sermon) is uplifting, practical, and theological. Prayer requests are spoken aloud into a mic that is passed between worshippers. Queer attendees are always specifically welcomed and affirmed from the front of the chapel.

A website describing Thursday Night Church, which the congregation launched in the spring of 2024, says the service is for "those hurt by closed minds and closed doors."

Ashley Popperson ('14, SSW'14), who began casting a vision for Thursday Night Church in 2023, leads a prayer before communion.

Plans for the revamped service began in late 2023, spearheaded by ministers Ashley Popperson ('14, SSW'14) and Rachel Barton ('23).

"We spent a lot of time in prayer and conversation to try and discern the needs of the city," Barton says of those early planning meetings. "The things we came up with were around longing to create spaces for vulnerability in community. We talked a lot about the epidemic of loneliness, particularly for younger folks. I think the pandemic tore up a bunch of ways that people knew how to connect with and relate to one another, and we really wanted to cultivate the opposite of that and make space where people could feel safe to be themselves together."

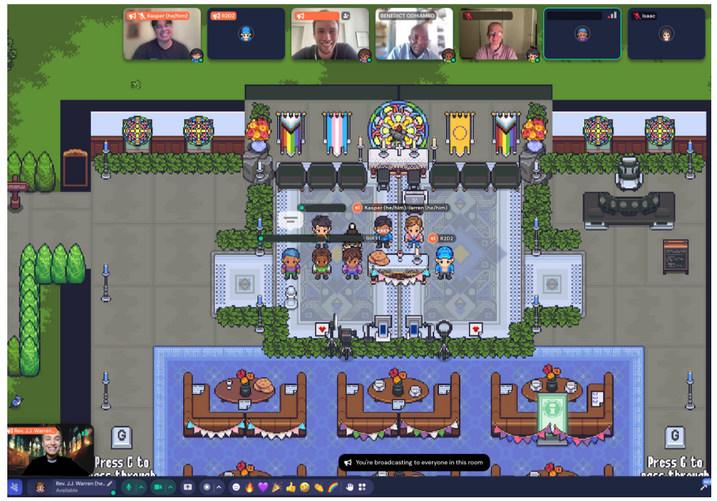
With church attendance plummeting nationwide and some queer or doubting Christians in search of a community where they are fully embraced, communities like Old South are breaking free of traditional and theological confines to extend radical welcome to seekers and saints alike. It's a welcome embodied by the first few lines of "Seat at the Table," the Common Hymnal tune Woodhams leads at the beginning of each Thursday service:

Don't it feel good to know you've always got a place, yeah
A seat at the table that no one can take
I know that this road can be long
But, loved one, we welcome you home.

Virtual formation

The sanctuary at Church of the Young Prophets looks like others I've sat in: a large chancel, bordered by green plants, in the center of which is a table with communion bread and wine. A place for prayer is off to the side, and pride flags flank a circular stained-glass window at the center front of the room. Instead of pews or rows of chairs, couches are arranged in six semicircles around coffee tables, which hold more communion elements.

On a Saturday in October, Rev. J.J. Warren approaches the lectern and greets those who have gathered for church. "We welcome you in the fullness of all of who you are," says Warren ('22). "All of who you are is celebrated and welcomed and affirmed in this community."



Church of the Young Prophets uses the online platform Gather.Town for its weekly church services, which include prayers, songs, readings, communion, and a sermon.

He continues with several instructions for how to engage during the service.

"We invite you, if you are in Gather.Town, to use the emoji bar at the bottom of your screen to let us know how you are approaching this time of worship. What are you feeling as you come into this space? In the chat, let us know where in the world you are, and who you are with as you worship with us today."

Emojis pop into the bottom left of my screen indicating feelings of anxiety, happiness, silliness. Members report in the chat that they are logging on from Oklahoma, Illinois, and elsewhere. Warren signed in from Vienna, Austria, where he lives with his husband and is pursuing a PhD.

That's right: Church of the Young Prophets is not built with bricks and mortar, but pixels and bytes. Members assemble each Saturday from seven countries using Gather.Town, a virtual meeting space that allows groups to customize it to their own needs and greet each other using avatars they control with their keyboard arrows. A Zoom-like video chat window shows each person's face, unless they choose to remain off camera. Today, we're in the sanctuary, but during the week church members and volunteers meet privately with Warren in his virtual office, sit around a shared table, walk the prayer labyrinth, or sing karaoke on the church's rooftop lounge. A congregational channel on the gaming app Discord keeps the conversation and prayers going throughout the week—especially for Australian members who are asleep when the church is holding its Saturday church service.

"We're still here"

Church of the Young Prophets was born following a speech Warren delivered advocating for LGBTQIA+ inclusion at the United Methodist Church's 2019 General Conference, where the denomination reasserted its restrictions on queer members and clergy. LGBTQIA+ Methodists from around the world began to reach out to Warren, who was still working on an MDiv at STH, to express their concerns and hopes. To feel less alone.

"I really felt this calling to create a space for us as our denomination was furthering harm against LGBTQ people, to create a space where young queer people could gather and say, 'We're still here,'" Warren tells me in an interview.

They called themselves the Young Prophets Collective and initially gathered monthly on Zoom as something of a support group, facilitated by Warren and cocreator Alyssa Kuebler ('22). Over time, the group turned into a yearlong, global cohort of queer activists and ministry leaders working to "empower the people who were being disempowered by the church."

"We would work together for a year, and they would identify an injustice in their community, and then we'd work together to say, 'How might you meet that need?'" Warren says. It was an opportunity to take theories Warren and Kuebler were learning at STH, like asset-based community development and liberation theologies, "distilling them into an accessible way for mostly lay leadership," Warren says.

Courtesy of J.J. Warren

"I really felt this calling to create a space for us as our denomination was furthering harm against LGBTQ people, to create a space where young queer people could gather and say, 'We're still here.'"

—J.J. WARREN

UMC bishops have since voted to reverse course and formally embraced the queer community; the Young Prophets Collective is supported financially by the UMC's New England Conference. But the virtual congregation remains vital to its members—a few of whom are in countries where living openly as queer persons is dangerous or illegal. This is why Warren makes a point of limiting who can attend to those who affirm LGBTQIA+ people and beginning each service with a statement celebrating the queerness in the room.

"At a lot of churches, especially for queer people, you experience shame when you walk in," Warren says. "Even the act of walking into a church can be triggering, so we are very explicit in the fact that we start every service with, 'All of who you are is celebrated.'"

Designing a space of welcome

In thinking about what the respective services would look and feel like, leaders of both Thursday Night Church and Church of the Young Prophets say they started with a vision of the people they wanted to serve.

Old South's Thursday Night Church was born out of Jazz Worship, a vibrant, music-forward expression that drew a different crowd than those who showed up for one of two Sunday morning services. When longtime musician Willie Sordillo announced in 2023 that he would be moving on from leading the Thursday service, Old South leaders assembled a "dreaming team," which began to imagine a format change. Barton joined the ministry staff just as Popperson began holding visioning meetings for the future of Thursday worship.

"We spent a lot of time in discernment and got to a strong sense that there was a community of people who likely had grown up in the church—either the Evangelical or the Catholic Church—and that those folks had not been able to find a place that they could call home, be themselves, and be welcome, but also deeply resonate with the music and the shape of the service," Barton says.

To shape that service, Old South tapped Woodhams—a Nashville-trained songwriter and worship leader who is pursuing an MDiv at STH. About a year into the revamped service, Barton says, around 60 percent of those attending are new faces and "largely exactly the people we were hoping to make a service for: younger folks, queer folks, young professionals, students coming into the city."

Like the leaders of Old South Church, Warren sought input from the community instead of building the church on his own preconceived notions of what it should be. He describes the Church of the Young Prophets as cocreated.

One virtual service led to a four-week test run, after which Warren elicited feedback, which has led to a weekly service (and numerous other gatherings throughout the week) for two years. Services include prayers written by church members, both traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs, scripture readings, Warren's mini-sermon, and conversation around the couches. "We're constantly trying to reclaim different parts of the Christian tradition a little bit," Warren says.

He firmly believes their space is every bit as much a church—in all its pixelated glory—as the one with a steeple in the center of town.

"Jesus says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them,'" Warren says. "If we say, 'Yeah, this meant something 2,000 years ago,' how could we possibly say Jesus is not present here? Who are we to put a box on God and say that God could not be present through the media that we're encountering here?" ■

The God of New Things

A theology for when despair surrounds us

By James W. McCarty

Thus says the Lord,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters...
Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:14-19 (NRSV)

God is a God who does new things. God makes a way where there appears to be no way, as womanist wisdom regularly teaches us and this passage declares. God makes a way through mighty seas and desolate deserts. Whenever we see desolation, despair, or dissolution we should be reminded of these verses and look for the new thing that God is doing.

God did a new thing when Jesus declared freedom for prisoners, liberation for the oppressed, and salvation for sinners. From birth to baptism to transfiguration to resurrection, new things sprung up like dandelions throughout Jesus's life. God did a new thing when God sent the Spirit moving about the earth like a wind and setting the world alight like fire. And God continues to do new things even into the 21st century.

The world, it seems, is ever in crisis. Our politics, as 24-hour news and social media doomscrolling reminds us, is perpetually in crisis. Our relationships are in crisis, as what has been called an "epidemic of loneliness" continues to spread across the US even as we are more "connected," at least virtually, than we've ever been. Our climate and planet are in crisis, and we now know for sure that our actions have made the world our grandchildren will inherit more dangerous than the one we inherited. Fires, hurricanes, heat waves, and droughts will only increase, and with them violence and poverty. Even theological education, a backbone of the work of the church, is in crisis. Seminaries are closing, enrollments are declining, and Christianity, at least in this country, feels more and more co-opted by the powers of greed, hatred, and -isms. The old things are crumbling all around us.

It is in this context that our students and alumni are looking around and asking, "God, what is the new thing that you are doing?" And they are finding answers in all kinds of places. They are finding God answering and leading them to work as chaplains, teachers, organizers, healers, writers, artists, scholars, and, yes, innovative and imaginative pastors.

One such alumna, Rev. Katie Cole ('12, SSW'12), is the interim director of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). Recently having completed a successful housing justice campaign, GBIO is in a period of discernment as they seek to deepen their work and build bonds of solidarity across religious and racial differences.

Shutterstock

STH students participate in a peacemaking circle, led by James McCarty.

Another alumna, Erin Freeborn ('07), leads the organization Communities for Restorative Justice as it continues to expand its reach across Massachusetts and helps to bring healing, accountability, and transformation to individual lives and communities affected by the criminal justice system.

A third alumnus, David Tran ('24), is leading a new, innovative church, The Table, in San Diego that is attending to the unique spiritual wounds of queer people and people of color who have spent time in predominantly white American Evangelical spaces. The church gathers to participate in embodied practices of lament, justice, and healing as those hurt by forms of Christianity intertwined with white supremacy seek new life-giving ways of experiencing the divine.

And, finally, several of our current students have been at the forefront of local interfaith organizing to achieve a cease-fire in Gaza and a lasting and just peace in Palestine and Israel. They have organized interfaith dinners, protests, and community-building events at which Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Christians have been active.

In each of these instances, we have examples of leaders who find inherited ways of doing organizing, social justice, pastoral ministry, and more in the midst of renewal and revival. But such revival demands renovation. They are looking around for the new things God is doing and seeking to partner with that renewing Spirit in their work within and beyond church walls. And they are finding partners in this work among their neighbors wherever they are.

It is in this context that our students and alumni are looking around and asking, "God, what is the new thing that you are doing?" And they are finding answers in all kinds of places. They are finding God answering and leading them to work as chaplains, teachers, organizers, healers, writers, artists, scholars, and, yes, innovative and imaginative pastors.

James McCarty

Dave Green

Chaplains and pastors now undergo deeper training in trauma theory to attend to the wounds that corrupted systems, including religious ones, have caused.

The ministry and activism paradigms we've inherited—which include models of justice that sublimated racial and gender interests to "common denominator" issues in broad-based community organizing, punitive models of justice, ministry focused on souls over embodied experience, and the like—were too often caught up in the legacies of coloniality and the forms of domination associated with it. So even with all the good that has been done over the years within these frameworks, they have caused harm as well. The new things God is doing often involve healing inherited and collective traumas at the same time as pursuing justice and love in public. And so spaces are made for breathing and meditation in the midst of community organizing and justice, as practices of healing and accountability restore relationships in ways retributive approaches to justice has proven unable, and Christian churches reclaim non-Western cultural practices and the integration of nature in the Sunday service. These are new things!

To be responsive to this, STH recently launched a new curriculum that attends to these new things God is doing while building on the things we have always done so well (read more about the school's revised strategic plan and curriculum in the Dean's Message on page 1). Chaplains and pastors now undergo deeper training in trauma theory to attend to the wounds that corrupted systems, including religious ones, have caused. Students pursuing the certificate in religion and conflict transformation, which I direct, are gaining skills in community organizing alongside skills in restorative justice and peacebuilding to bring together the best insights of both escalating and de-escalating conflict to achieve social transformation. And students are flocking to a relatively new certificate in faith and ecological justice to prepare to do ministry in, literally, a climate unlike any we've seen in our living memory.

God continues to do new things. In the midst of this movement of the Spirit, we may be tempted like those who opposed Jesus to double down on old ways. However, faithfulness requires attending to the newness God continues to bring into the world. Our students are already doing this, and our curriculum is now as well. The new things God is doing will last for a season or two and then another new thing will come. Being able to teach seminarians during this kind of radical renewal is a true joy and a humbling vocation. Thanks be to God. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James W. McCarty is clinical assistant professor and director of the Tom Porter Religion & Conflict Transformation Program. He is an editor of *The Business of Incarceration: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Prison-Industrial Complex* (Cascade, 2025).

Spiritual Seeking Beyond the Walls

How college chaplaincies can serve a changing student population

By Gregory W. McGonigle ('21)

When I was an undergraduate in the late 1990s, religious student organizations and chaplaincies for Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism were beginning to become more established, alongside the Christian and Jewish chaplaincy programs that had preexisted them,[1] reflecting the changing religious landscape of the US as post-1965 immigrants made a home and sent their children to college.[2] The presence of this newer multiplicity of faiths on campus also encouraged the formation of interfaith councils to gather students of different faiths to learn about one another and to engage in projects to activate their common values in the world.

As we look to the future, another development is taking place alongside the increased multiplicity of faiths present on campus, and that is the growing number of students who arrive at universities stating they have "no preference" for their spiritual or religious identity. These students are not necessarily atheist, agnostic, or humanist, although some may be, but many in this category resonate more with the phrase "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR).[3] Many of these students have grown up in nonreligious households but come to campus curious about the role of religion in society and the world—and maybe in their own lives too. For most of my 20 years in university chaplaincy, student spiritual interest surveys have suggested this may describe up to 50 percent of college students. Another intriguing demographic is the number of students who respond to surveys claiming "multiple religious belonging"—they practice more than one faith.

1. McGonigle, Gregory W. *Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024.

2. Eck, Diana L. *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. San Francisco: Harper, 2002.

3. Mercadente, Linda A. *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious*. London: Oxford University Press, 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory W. McGonigle ('21) is dean of religious life and university chaplain at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga., where he has built a multifaith chaplaincy team and opened the Emory Interfaith Center. He is author of *Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education* (Pickwick, 2024).

Brandon Clifton

Shutterstock

4. Neal, Liza. Personal conversation with the author, 2013.

Many of these students have been raised in blended religious households and have grown up learning about and practicing more than one religion. This would have been surprising in the single-faith household in which I grew up, and yet it is now the lived reality of 20 percent or more of students.

And so, is college and university spiritual life poised for yet another chapter in its development as it seeks to serve an increasingly "nonreligious" (or multireligious), spiritually seeking population of students, faculty, and staff? What will it mean for us to carry forward our historic religious affiliations, serve the multiplicity of global faith traditions present on campus, and find creative new ways to reach and serve student populations that are SBNR?

One idea might be reinterpreting our chaplaincies to more clearly lift up constellations of spiritual practices, in addition to our continuing stewardship of our particular religious traditions. Rather than having a Jewish chaplain, a Christian chaplain, a Muslim chaplain, etc., one campus recently explored having chaplains of these faiths who might also hold the title of Chaplain for Contemplative Practices, Chaplain for Service, or Chaplain for the Arts, etc.[4]

Some offerings we have begun experimenting with at Emory may suggest ways of extending a welcome to those not rooted in a single-faith background through lifting up shared practices such as study, the arts, friendship, and contemplation that resonate across spiritual identities.

- For several years, we have offered an interfaith preorientation program for entering first-year students focused on learning about religious diversity. Although we originally thought it would attract students devout in their faiths looking to connect on campus, we have found many students choose the program as a first exposure to religions.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, our music director, who is Christian, began a midweek musical meditation online to connect faculty, staff, and students who were socially distancing and sought a time for inclusive music, prayer, and community to address the concerning issues arising in the news. This online offering has continued since we returned to campus, creating a new entry point to the chaplaincy, perhaps more accessible than crossing the threshold of the chapel.
- Building on a fellowship program he once ran to help Jewish students create a connection to Judaism beyond the walls of Jewish institutions, our campus rabbi has created a fellowship program—open to students of all faiths and none—focused on fostering the arts of low-tech, in-person communication, friendship-making, and community-building, as the prevalence of online life has made such interactions rare.
- And our Buddhist chaplain, beyond offering weekly times for Buddhist meditation and chanting that appeal to traditional Buddhists, offers a mindfulness program, based in Buddhist practices, that welcomes all from any background seeking out mindfulness.

There are more examples, but the challenge and opportunity facing campus spiritual life today is how to make spiritual traditions, communities, and practices accessible for those who may have no reference point for them—or who may have negative reference points, shaped by examples in culture. In a time when students continue to say some of their hopes for a college education are to help them work out questions of identity, values, purpose, and contribution,[5] spiritual life on campus has a crucial role, if we can develop the skillful means for the moment. ■

5. Astin, Alexander W., Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer A. Lindholm. *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Many of these students have been raised in blended religious households and have grown up learning about and practicing more than one religion.

SERMON

"Like watchers at the gate, we are called... to be active witnesses to the power of a vision of a just world that is not a utopian pipe dream or the mumblings of hopeless romantics."

Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Religion and Black Studies emilie townes was the celebrated preacher during the 2024 Matriculation Service of Worship on September 25, 2024. She charged incoming and seasoned students alike with becoming "watchers at the gate" and taking up the mantle of doing the hard work ahead during their seminary journey.

Scan here for a video of townes' sermon

Dave Green

Spiritual Direction for Seekers

New practice serves BIPOC women

Camille Obata describes her spirituality as "fluid and expansive," deeply influenced by the Christian, Shin Buddhist, and Shinto traditions she experienced as a child. In January, Obata ('22) launched a care practice to help others explore their own spiritual direction. Certified as a spiritual director by Liberated Together in May 2024, Obata offers clients one-on-one readings in astrology and tarot, spiritual direction, career discernment, grief support, group work, and workshops.

"Within my practice, I work with people who identify as BIWOC and gender expansive BIPOC seeking connection with the divine/spiritual outside of traditional religious spaces," Obata says. "Through guided practices, my hope is that the people I work with can gain clarity about their passions and motivations in life."

Obata's approach to spiritual direction has been deeply influenced by her work as a hospital and hospice chaplain, which taught her to be curious and listen deeply. But the first time Obata met with a spiritual director was at STH.

"He helped me realize that I wanted to show up authentically as myself throughout the process of seminary. So I did—I made sure each paper I wrote was relevant and meaningful to me," Obata says. "STH provided me the space to deconstruct, develop, and excavate my spiritual identity. And it was a place that celebrated my authentic story." —*S.H.*

Courtesy of Camille Obata

Courtesy of Jasmin Figueroa

A Place to Question, Heal

As a Master of Divinity student, Jasmin Figueroa studied Christian education and formation—while wrestling with her own faith. She'd become disillusioned by US Christian leaders "who upheld systemic oppression through their silence or complicity," and she feared for communities where she saw a lack of trauma-informed spiritual care.

Her response was to create These Sacred Pathways, a private practice where she helps clients with their own spiritual direction, in 2023 following her graduation from STH with a PhD in practical theology. As an academic, Figueroa studied how millennials navigate their spiritualities; with her practice she helps them do so. "I went into this work hoping to support people who feel isolated from their spiritualities or faith communities," says Figueroa ('23), who is especially interested in working with seminarians, clergy, and people raised in the church who are dealing with loneliness, pressure, and challenging their own theologies.

"I was raised to fear feeling far from God," she says. "Challenging God, the sacred texts, and one's community is normal—and often righteous." —*M.C.*

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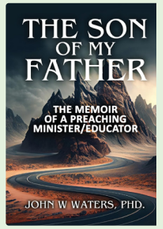
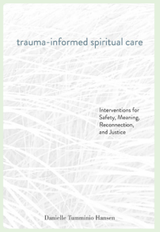
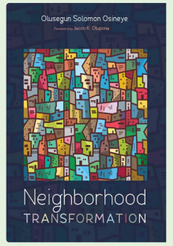
STH alums in print



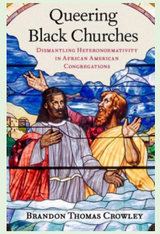
The Son of My Father: The Memoir of a Preaching Minister/Educator (Dorrance Publishing, 2023), **John W. Waters ('67, GRS'70)**



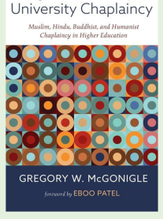
Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care (Fortress Press, 2024), **Danielle Tumminio Hansen ('14)**



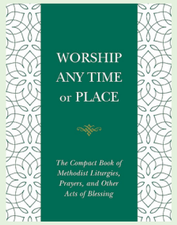
Neighborhood Transformation: A Specialized Ministry to African Immigrants (Resource Publications, 2024), **Olusegun Solomon Osineye ('18,'22)**



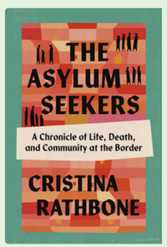
Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations (Oxford, 2024), **Brandon Thomas Crowley ('12,'19)**



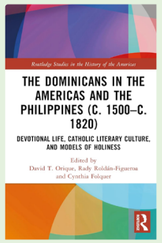
Religious Diversity and University Chaplaincy: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Humanist Chaplaincy in Higher Education (Pickwick Publications, 2024), **Gregory William McGonigle ('21)**



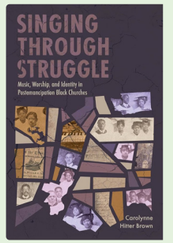
Worship Any Time or Place (Abingdon Press, 2024), **Nelson Robert Cowan ('19)**



The Asylum Seekers: A Chronicle of Life, Death, and Community at the Border (Broadleaf, 2025), **Canon Cristina F. Rathbone ('09)**



The Dominicans in the Americas and the Philippines (c. 1500–c. 1820) (Routledge, 2024), **Rady Roldán-Figueroa ('05)**



Singing through Struggle: Music, Worship, and Identity in Postemancipation Black Churches (University Press of Mississippi, 2025), **Carolynne Hitter Brown ('09)**

Courtesy of Brandon Thomas Crowley

Cultivating Safe Churches for Black, Queer Christians

Alum's mission began with his own coming out story

Brandon Thomas Crowley had been pastor at Myrtle Baptist Church in Newton, Mass., for six years before he came out to his congregation. "I didn't know how people were going to react," says Crowley ('12,'19). "I was fearful that I could lose my job. It was a moment of faith."

Not only was Crowley's faith rewarded by the acceptance of the congregation, but he began to notice more queer people joining the church. "It dawned on me that just because I was queer and the church loved me, it did not mean that they understood what it meant to be in community with, or to minister to, LGBTQIA+ folks."

Myrtle Baptist assembled a task force to consider how to become open and affirming to all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. But they quickly found there was no established road map. "We looked for resources to help us do this work, and everything we found was white," Crowley says. "And you can't talk about Black sexuality with white faces."

As a result, Crowley set out to create a resource for other churches to use. He began studying Black churches for his dissertation at STH and continued that work with his first book, *Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations* (Oxford University Press, 2024), which lays out the process used by several open and affirming Black churches. —*M.C.*

The School of Theology's Distinguished Alumni for 2024 were (from left) Matthew Greer ('03), director of music and worship arts at St. John's United Methodist Church in Albuquerque, N.M.; Dianne Reistroffer ('82,'89), a seasoned United Methodist pastor, professor, and administrator; and Emerging Leader Emma Arely Escobar ('14), director of the Hispanic-Latinx Center and assistant professor of faith-based organizing at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, shown here with Dean G. Sujin Pak. Rolf Nolasco, Jr. ('02), the Rueben P. Job Professor of Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Theology at Garrett–Evangelical Theological Seminary, is not pictured.

IN MEMORIAM

James Lawson ('60)

1928–2024

Methodist pastor **James Lawson** embodied Christianity's turn-the-other-cheek ethic. Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience, as well as by his pacifist mother, Lawson ('60) was expelled from Vanderbilt's divinity school for organizing peaceful sit-ins at segregated Southern lunch counters, went to jail multiple times for nonviolent civil rights protests, and as strategist of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike, summoned movement leaders to the city.

Headlining those responders was Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59), who was assassinated during that visit.

Lawson, whom King called "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world," died June 9, 2024, at age 95 from cardiac arrest in Los Angeles, where he lived.

"An entire generation of younger leaders first learned, from him, the power of nonviolent resistance as the most moral, practical, and effective tool for social transformation," says the Rev. Walter Fluker (GRS'88, STH'88, Hon.'24), Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor Emeritus of Ethical Leadership at the School of Theology. "In fact, this nation and the world are indebted to this largely unsung hero."

–Rich Barlow

Lawson being arrested in 1960.

Dave Green, Bettmann via Getty Images

STH publishes alumni obituaries online

bu.edu/sth/category/alumniae-deaths/

reflection

The Power of Lament

Practiced as individuals and communities, lament helps us counter our godforsakenness

By emilie m. townes

I believe in the power of lament. Biblical books like Psalms and Lamentations point to lament's power and how lament can help individuals or communities find pathways to salvation. That's because at the heart of lament is truth-telling about what we are facing with as much accuracy and precision as we can. Whether communal or individual, lament is a powerful cry of distress and a rending of the heart. In the Hebrew Bible, communal lament is used by and/or on behalf of a community to express complaint, sorrow, and grief over impending doom that could be physical or cultural. It could also be a tragedy or a series of calamities that had already happened. Today, this rending of the heart can be a robust counter to the potent and death-dealing polarizations and animosities that lead us more toward godforsakenness than love and justice.

We know those times of godforsakenness all too well when we cannot understand or make sense of why innocents die so needlessly in their school rooms or why we can be so inhumane to one another—be it with our antisemitism or Islamophobia or classism or heterosexism or racism or sexism or trans-ism or any other -ism. Or when we live in a society that produces misery and suffering in relentlessly systematic and structural ways because we have become too comfortable with the rhetoric of polarization that creates endless numbers of "them" versus "us," and the "us" must win...always. Or when we face the challenge of mending the tears in our relationships with one another and the ways in which our personal faith is being tested with war upon war and the deaths and sufferings they always bring. Or as we battle our personal sorrows and sufferings, as we look around us and cannot find an outstretched hand of hope or solace, investigate our innards and realize that we are living in the hollows of loneliness, or observe an unrelenting hatred out of which we cannot see any way. Or when our days seem filled with persecution and God's absence is the only friend that we have.

It is lament—when we name the realities of our situations, as individuals or communities, and ask God for help with as much accuracy, precision, humility, and honesty that we can—that counters this godforsakenness with a sturdy, stout hope that joins with powerful and precise genuine lament that refuses to give in to despair. Fierce and abiding hope steadies our nerves and increases our will to do the work of building a bone-deep, soul-stirring, truly liberating and loving society that is grounded in justice in our worlds—for this is the work our souls must have. ■

Michael Spencer

emilie m. townes is Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Religion and Black Studies. Among her many publications is *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). She has been president of the American Academy of Religion, the Society for the Study of Black Religion, and the Society of Christian Ethics. She is an American Baptist clergywoman and a fellow in the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

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"As my husband Tom and I like to say, 'Philanthropy is our family business.' We've both worked in educational fundraising since we first met and have seen firsthand the generous effect of planned gifts on the institutions we have served. As I made plans for how to designate the remainder of my estate, it made sense to designate some of it to the School of Theology, where I have had an opportunity to stay involved as a member of the Dean's Advisory Board."

Rebecca Tseng Smith (CAS'80, STH'82) and **Tom Smith Tseng**