

# Transforming Theologies, Transforming Lives

*“United Seminary helped me figure out how to use my gifts, talents, and passions to serve my congregation and the denomination I love.” - Andrea Johnson, MDiv '17, current DMin student*



Andrea Johnson, MDiv '17,  
current Doctor of Ministry student

After leaving her business career for a calling in ministry, Andrea Johnson graduated with a Master of Divinity degree in 2017 and now serves as Minister of Congregational Programs at Minnesota Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. But graduating didn't mark the end of her time at United.

Andrea has remained involved and invested as a current Doctor of Ministry student, member of the Board of Trustees, and enthusiastic donor. Her passion and support for United are inspired by the life-changing, theology-shaping influence of Demian Wheeler, associate professor of Philosophical Theology and Religious Studies.

“United Seminary and Demian Wheeler, in particular, changed my life, helped me find and live into my new vocation as a ‘congregational theologian,’ a term Demian coined for me and helped me discover,” Andrea said.

Andrea has taken several courses with Demian and noted how he cares deeply about exposing his

students to a range of theological thought: Christian, Unitarian Universalist (UU), Humanist, Religious Naturalist, Liberation, Black, Queer, and Feminist.

“I have never met someone who is doing the work they feel called to do in the world more than Demian,” Andrea continued. “He is so passionate about teaching theology and helping students find their theological voice. He gives generously of himself and his time to mentor and support his students.”

## “Theological Matchmaker”

Students joke that Demian's greatest superpower is his “theological matchmaking” ability. Andrea recounted a UU class focused on religious naturalists where Demian proceeded to match each student with a specific theologian based on students' theological inclinations conveyed in their papers and conversations.

“Demian helps you articulate and be grounded in your own theology,” Andrea explained. “He makes sure you can start to do this—put stakes in the ground—that will ground and sustain your ministry far beyond seminary.”

## Living Out Theology

Andrea says it was the last two years of seminary under the tutelage of Demian that her own theology and calling came into focus.

Andrea's theology incorporates the love ethic of Martin Luther King, Jr.



Demian Wheeler, associate professor,  
Philosophical Theology & Religious Studies

grounded in pantheist religious naturalism influenced by the writings of Bernard Loomer. And she doesn't just “think” her theology; Andrea lives into it, specifically her passion for racial justice and seeking ways to dismantle white supremacy.

“If we acknowledge God as the restless, ambiguous, interconnected web of being, and the ground of all reality, then we contribute to the divine life by the ethic of love we bring to the work of justice in this beautiful yet broken world,” she said.

## A Hope for United

“I want other students to have the benefit of being mentored and taught by professors like Dr. Wheeler who care about them, who go the extra mile to make sure that their ministries or other leadership work is grounded in their faith, their tradition, and their deepest theological convictions,” Andrea said. “I want to help keep United Strong so there can be a progressive and prophetic voice that helps us embody the Great Commandment to Love God and Neighbor.”



James B. Nelson classroom

## Supporting Students with James B. Nelson Scholarships

A Message from Cindy Schriever, Vice President for Advancement

Just days after announcing our plans for dedicating our largest classroom (pictured above) to James B. Nelson at our United Days celebration, the event came to a screeching halt due to COVID-19.

You may recall Jim was featured in our last issue of VOICES. He was a trailblazer, pioneer, and innovator, and United was fortunate to have him on faculty as a passionate professor and thought leader.

While we recognize our disappointment pales in comparison to the ways so many people have been affected by this course of events, our efforts to honor Jim continue.

This fall, we will dedicate the classroom to Jim. Details will be developed depending on gathering guidelines, and we will honor his legacy of ethical leadership either in person or virtually.

We also continue to raise critical James B. Nelson Scholarship dollars to support enrollment. Even though we do everything possible to keep United

tuition affordable, students still require financial and gift aid to pursue their education and vocation. We want every student who is called to this work to find a home at United.

Every heartfelt scholarship gift makes a difference in the lives of our students, who are preparing to become the kind of strong, ethical leaders we need in all facets of our culture.

We invite you to join donors like Judith and Jim Scoville, who contributed \$25,000 as a lead gift to support United's students who continue to embody Jim's legacy. When asked what values Jim most embodied, Judith replied simply, "Love. He was a very loving person."

Thank you for supporting United students. Your generosity changes the lives that change the world.

*You may designate a scholarship gift online at [www.unitedseminary/culture/giving.edu](http://www.unitedseminary/culture/giving.edu) or by mail to United Theological Seminary. Please include 'James B. Nelson Scholarship' in the memo section.*

## Congratulations, Class of 2020!

The United Class of 2020 graduated during a unique time. While United has postponed the formal commencement ceremony for these 28 graduates until 2021, the staff and faculty celebrated their accomplishments via Zoom on May 1.

They join a community of more than 1,000 alums, and we are filled with hope for the future that's already being shaped by these inspirational leaders.



# The Broad Benefits of Quality Ministry Training

## A Message from the President

A significant tenet of higher education in the United States has been that motivated students invest in their futures through time and tuition in their college and graduate training. It is anticipated by the model that those investments will return dividends through improved lifetime financial earnings and personal career fulfillment. Professions like ministry, chaplaincy, and non-profit leadership have been challenged in the above value proposition as compensation models have not kept pace with the required tuition and time investments.

In the past, local churches and denominations have supported students' education in order to ensure availability of competent leaders for the church. But through the last decades, the economics of the local church and the denominations have all but eliminated the availability of these funds.

Some have argued that the preparation of ministers and chaplains should be reduced to keep the economic costs down. They have argued that this should be accomplished through the reduction of credits or even the elimination of the core Master of Divinity degree as the required gateway to these careers. At the same time, organizations that hire seminary graduates continue to expand their expectations of the skills and knowledge of those they hire. No longer is being an excellent preacher or teacher sufficient; ministers also must be able to manage the budget and fundraising and do so in less than a full-time role. Future ministers and chaplains don't need less education, they need more!

United has worked aggressively to reduce the financial burden for students by offering scholarships underwritten by generous donors. The average United student receives scholarships that reduce their tuition costs by 40-50%.

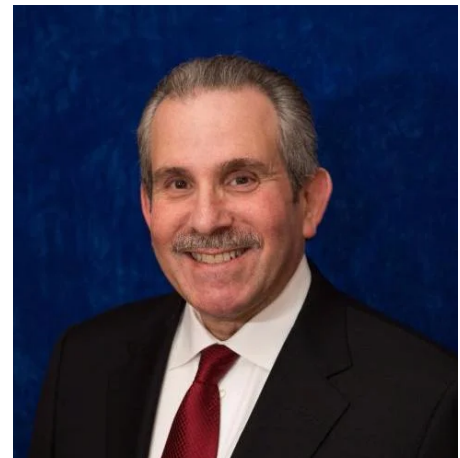
Without scholarships many of United's students could not afford or justify their seminary education investment. We are most grateful to those who have given to United's scholarship funds and hope that everyone will consider a contribution to help support a student scholarship.

Thank you for your generosity and ongoing support of United and its students!

Peace,

Lewis P. Zeidner, PhD

President, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities



## Graduate Spotlight: Riva Tabelisma



Riva Tabelisma (MA/MDiv, '20) followed her calling to seminary from the Philippines to the Twin Cities. She is leading on the global and national levels in the United Methodist Church and currently serves as the Board Secretary of the National Association of Filipino American United Methodists.

Riva credits her time at United for helping shape her faith and vocational direction.

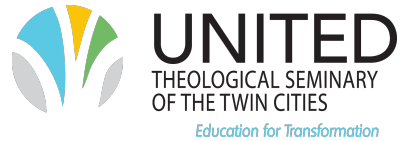
“My seminary journey has been life-changing. I gained not only an education, but also a purpose to be God's hands and feet in sharing God's love to a broken world,” she said. “Sharing lives with my classmates, professors, and the rest of the United community not only allowed me to gain friends, but also provided the support that I needed as I prepare for my vocation. Having the feeling that I am not alone in doing God's work is energizing and comforting. United Seminary provided the space for me to lose and find myself in the ministry.”

Following graduation, Riva was appointed lead pastor for Community UMC in Columbia Heights, MN.

## CONGRATULATIONS, CLASS OF 2020!

- **Master of Divinity:** Penny Bonsell, Stacy Craig, JD Haas, Sarah Holst, Kyle Homstad, Deborah Jance, Mitch Nelson, Meredith Olson, Vicki Richardson, John Scheuer, Riva Tabelisma (MA also), Yolanda Williams
- **Master of Arts in Leadership:** Allison Johnson-Heist, Lisbeth Melendez-Rivera, Sheryl Schwyhart
- **Master of Arts:** Max Brumberg-Kraus, Robert Galkiewicz, Hugh Huelster, Ann Larrabee, Mary Beth McRaith, Melissa Miller, Cathy Pino (MDiv, '16)
- **Master of Arts in Theological Studies:** Matthew Whitaker
- **Doctor of Ministry:** Saw Octavius Aye, Bonita Kitt, Shawn Moore, Shalom Reznik-Bell, William Sieben

VOICES contributors: Carla Barnhill, Cindi Beth Johnson, Laura Larson, Cindy Schriever



767 Eustis Street, Suite 140  
St. Paul, MN 55114

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# VOICES

## June 2020

Welcome to a new issue of VOICES, a newsletter to keep donors and friends connected with what's happening at United. Thank you for being an essential part of our mission to develop creative, compassionate, ethical leaders who are building a more just world.