

## UNITED STUDENTS: Change Agents for Social Transformation

United has a long tradition of sending graduates into the world who are committed to social justice work. And for many students, that work begins long before they finish their degree. United students are developing projects like a ministry support network for Black women clergy, an LGBTQ-affirming program for Christian students at a major university, an innovative magazine designed to elevate elementary children's voices, a program for Black housing ownership, and a call to address the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. This work is being shaped by United's Social Transformation Program.

While social change and racial justice have been central to United since its founding, the Social Transformation Program was started about five years ago by Rev. Dr. Steve Newcom ('80, '19) with a curriculum crafted specifically to shape students into ethical, compassionate, changemaking leaders needed in churches, chaplaincy settings, non-profits, and countless other organizations. Now led by Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis and Rev. Dr. Gary Green, the program is ranked as one of the best of its kind and draws students ready and eager to engage in and heal a hurting world.

"Change for its own sake doesn't matter. Change for the well-being of our world is our calling. It's what we strive for every day," explains Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics and Social Transformation Supported by the McVay Endowment.

"What United does uniquely and so well is we empower students to envision a world of justice, learn about

effective ways to make social change, and then bring those skills and visions together in innovative projects that actually transform the world," says Justin. "Our students are change agents right now, and their abilities and knowledge are getting stronger and stronger through what they are learning and how they are applying it."

Lisbeth Melendez Rivera ('20), a Roman Catholic lay leader and activist in the Washington, DC area, chose United because of its open commitment to social justice, as well as the generosity of faculty and staff. Her work involves activating clergy and faith leaders to step out from behind the pulpit, coordinate with parishioners in the pews, and head into the streets in order to be vested fully in the change they seek.

"I am called to social justice. I am called to work for an equitable world where our humanity is not in doubt, and our worthiness to God and our fellow humans is respected and celebrated," says Lisabeth. "The Social Transformation Program helped me hone into my strengths and shore up my weaknesses. It opened my eyes to new perspectives and helped me re-examine old attitudes and prejudices. In general, the program helped me become a better-rounded leader."

Follow United's blog ([blog.unitedseminary.edu](http://blog.unitedseminary.edu)) and social media pages to read more about the transformational work by our students, alums, and faculty.

*The United community participated in Twin Cities racial justice marches led by Black spiritual leaders in May and June.*

*L to R: Rev. Sara Smalley (Director for Student Mentorship and Contextual Education), Rev. T. Michael Rock (adjunct faculty), Rev. Dr. Justin Tabia-Sanis (Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics and Social Transformation), and Rev. Tara Parrish ('12, '16).*



*"Change for the well-being of our world is our calling. It's what we strive for every day."*

*-Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis*

# THREE PILLARS OF A UNITED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

United has been at the forefront of transformational leadership development since its founding nearly 60 years ago. Our degree programs are built on three core interdisciplinary pillars of learning that equip students with spiritual grounding and imaginative problem solving in order to be effective changemakers: theology and the arts, social transformation, and interreligious dialogue. No matter their vocational direction, students leave the seminary as the creative, compassionate, values-driven leaders the world wants and needs.



*Sabbath (2020), Melissa Miller ('20)*

## THEOLOGY AND THE ARTS

“The arts are in the DNA of United,” says Dr. Jennifer Awes-Freeman, Assistant Professor of Theology and the Arts.

United is unique in its full integration of the arts into the core curriculum. Every student takes at least one arts class, while all professors encourage robust theological inquiry and spiritual expression through creative endeavors.

“I can't tell you how many times I've had students take an arts class and say, ‘Oh, wow! I didn't think of the arts as a resource for ministry or a tool for community-building,’” says Jennifer.

Even as COVID has canceled gallery shows and live performances at United and our partner organizations, students and faculty adapted to continue to meet for a weekly arts lunch, share poetry and recent creations, and host artist talks and other creative projects online. You can see their work on United's website ([www.unitedseminary.edu](http://www.unitedseminary.edu)), blog, and our social media pages.

## SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

At the heart of United's mission is the necessity of social transformation for a more just and loving world. This missional focus is woven into all of our degree programs and led by professors Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis and Rev. Dr. Gary Green who head up the Social Transformation concentration at United.

In the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd, United's students, staff, faculty, and alums have joined their voices--and their activism--in the global call for racial justice. The United community has protested in the Twin Cities and across the nation, and created resources for churches to take on the difficult and complex conversations necessary for dismantling white supremacy. Justin and Gary have been in high demand as guest presenters for denominational and congregational discussions, and United's written resources have been shared widely across social media platforms.

On campus, this work is coordinated by the Committee Advocating for Racial Justice (CARJ), a group of students, faculty, staff, and board members committed to challenging and addressing structures--within United and beyond--that perpetuate injustice and oppression. That means ensuring United's own policies, programs, pedagogies, and school climate are racially inclusive.



*Lucia Kalinosky ('21)*

## INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

As the pain of the world makes itself plain, the need for highly trained spiritual care providers has become more important than ever. United's focus on interreligious chaplaincy helps us prepare students to serve as chaplains in a variety of settings. Our alums are well-equipped to offer care and compassion in a world abundant with diverse faith traditions, cultures, and experiences.

After a career in public health and nonprofits, Lucia Kalinosky ('21) felt called to offer that kind of spiritual care in an urban hospital setting. They chose United because of the robust training in intercultural and interreligious chaplaincy.

“To be effective, you have to think deeply about what the existence of other religions means theologically,” explains Lucia, a Quaker whose own interactions almost always span different faith backgrounds.

In these unique times, Lucia is creating a remote clinical pastoral education program to work with transgender people seeking support. Lucia credits United for preparing them for a vocation that requires the stamina of “an emotional athlete.”

## ALUM SPOTLIGHT | Lena Gardner

### Justice-making and liberation through faith

As the co-founder and Executive Director of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU), Lena Gardner ('15) is helping forge a sacred space that expands the role and visibility of Black UUs and harnesses Love's power "to create a base of Black UUs who can fight for Black Lives and our collective liberation."

During an internship for her master's program at United, Lena met and began to coordinate with organizers for Black Lives Matter. Her work brought her into contact with Black UU leaders who were experiencing a lack of support and spiritual nourishment in their churches. Following both a need and a calling, they formed BLUU.

BLUU serves as an online spiritual community, while organizing to meet broader goals that expand the power and capacity of Black UUs within the faith. The group provides support, information, and resources for Black



*Lena Gardner ('15), co-founder and Executive Director of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, leads a small prayer circle at The BLUU Revival in Kansas City in April 2018.*

UUs; and justice-making and liberation through faith. Lena says that as BLUU continues to grow into a long-term, sustainable organization, they plan to start mini congregations in 2021. Learn more at [www.blacklivesuu.com](http://www.blacklivesuu.com).

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*"The commitment of United to create relevant spiritual leaders to serve a turbulent, crumbling world is what helped launch me into this current path." - Lena Gardner ('15)*



*M.D. (Pete) McVay*



*Kita McVay*

## MCVAY FAMILY | A legacy of support for United

For the last 30 years, members of the McVay family have been active partners in supporting United and its mission. Their inspired investment in both financial gifts and seminary leadership began in 1990 when M.D. (Pete) McVay, a former president of Cargill, and his wife, Mary, witnessed the dynamic impact United alumni were having in the church. Since then, the McVays have been a consistent and valued part of the United community.

Through the generosity of the McVay Foundation, countless United students have received scholarships to help them follow their call into ministry. In addition, the McVay Endowed Chair in Christian Ethics helps United draw and retain world-class faculty, like Rev. Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis, who equip students with the skills they need to transform the world.

"It was a high priority for M.D. to apply Christian ethics to everyday life," says Kita McVay, M.D.'s daughter and a United alum ('96, MA; '09, honorary doctorate) who describes her theological studies as vital to the "underpinnings of life."

From 2005 to 2009, Kita served as president of United, offering her business skills and theological background to develop a forward-looking vision for the school.

"United Theological Seminary has long been a leader in educating and fostering strong leaders who can guide individuals and groups in discerning their moral responsibilities to one another. We are pleased to be able to support this work," says Kita.

We celebrate with gratitude the McVay family's legacy of support for United over the last three decades.

## CELEBRATE UNITED!

We have so much to celebrate as we head into the Fall term. We are not only thrilled to welcome the largest number of enrolling students in the last decade, but we are also proud of the caring leadership of our students and alums in the face of a global pandemic and a national uprising against racial injustice.

**Join us in October** as we kick off United's Annual Fund with a three-week campaign called **Celebrate United!** We're using a digital platform that makes it easy to make your annual gift as well as invite friends and family to support our students through donations, matching gifts, and challenge gifts. Every dollar will go toward making sure United students have what they need to thrive during their seminary experience--from scholarships, to a top-notch faculty, to spiritual and emotional support, to leading-edge distance learning options.

Watch your email or follow us on Facebook or LinkedIn for more details about how you can **Celebrate United!**



# UNITED

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
OF THE TWIN CITIES

*Education for Transformation*

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of United,

The accomplishments of United's students, faculty, and alums sampled in this issue of VOICES are truly moving. In the midst of this complex time, they are hard at work healing the world and offering hope.

United has always focused on issues of justice, faithfulness, and inclusivity. We continue to be about the essential work of educating ethical leaders for church and society. In 2020 we have witnessed the United community show up and act for justice, adapt quickly in the face of a pandemic, and respond graciously to the needs of those suffering from the economic downturn.

Your unwavering support allows United to continue this work. You help us carry out our mission to educate leaders who will transform the world.

Thank you for believing in us and for supporting United with your generosity and care. We trust that you will see in the focus and work of United a reflection of the things that matter most to you--an extension of your own faith-filled commitments.

Sincerely,

Lewis P. Zeidner Ph.D., President



# VOICES

September  
2020