

Upwelling

Connections and Reflections from The BTS Center

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Summer / 2023

Welcome to the Summer 2023 issue of *Upwelling*, The BTS Center's occasional print newsletter. We are delighted to connect with you in this way, and we hope that when you are finished reading, you might pass your copy along to someone else who might be interested.

We've named this publication *Upwelling*, an ecological term that relates to coastal ecosystems such as our own, where winds blow strongly and frequently across the surface of the ocean near the coastline. These winds push the warmer surface waters further out to sea, allowing space for deep, colder, nutrient-rich water to rise to the surface, in turn providing sustenance for a multitude of small creatures and allowing for a complex, diverse ecosystem to thrive. This process is known as upwelling.



Now, perhaps more than ever, we need creative movement and imaginative regeneration to meet the spiritual challenges of our ecological crises. Without the communal work of bringing forth new life from the depths of our traditions, we risk stagnation and despair. With this in mind, at The BTS Center, we think of the work we are offering as a kind of upwelling, existing at the confluence of spirituality and ecology, catalyzing spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership. We hope that you will join us in this journey, adding your own holy movement to this spiritual ecosystem.

The BTS Center Invites You to Convocation

A Tradition 118 Years in the Making

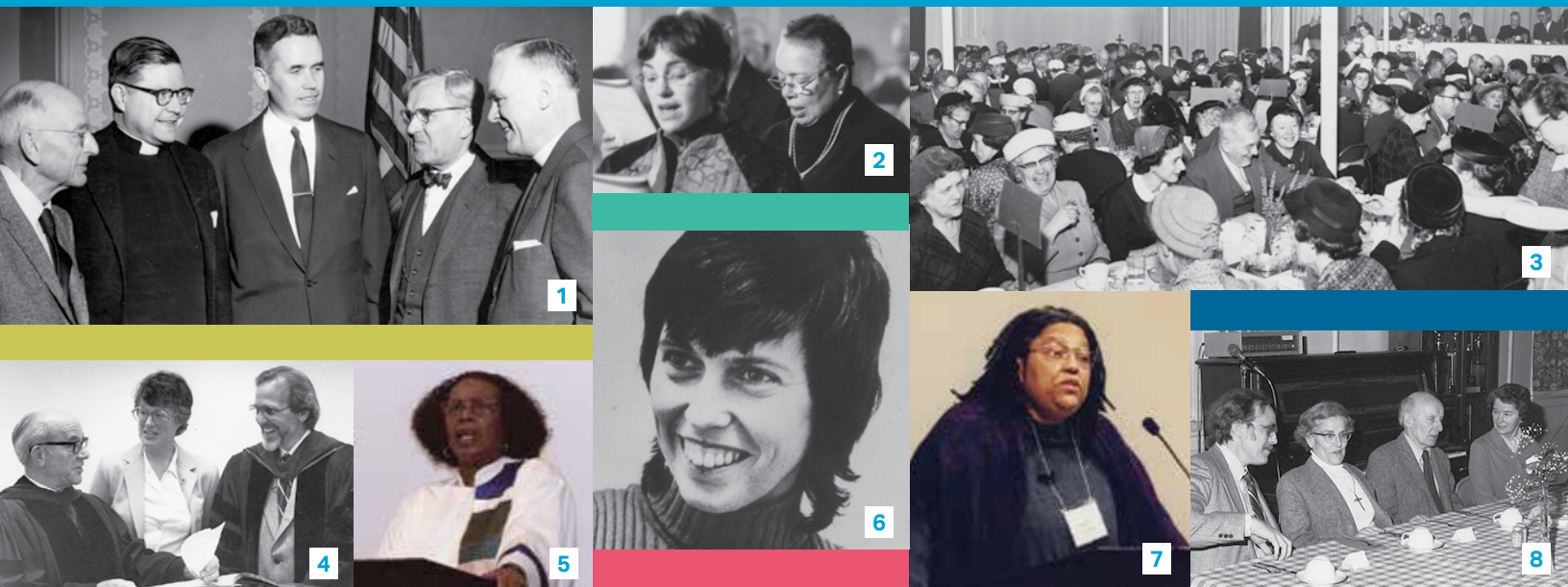
When the Covid-19 pandemic brought everything to a sudden halt in March 2020, we were in the midst of planning for Convocation 2020. First, we postponed, but when we realized the disruption would be more long-term, we made the decision to move Convocation online. Convocation 2020 ended up being the first of three online Convocations, each one special in its own way, but this year, we are looking forward to gathering in person — Thursday and Friday, September 28 and 29, in Hallowell, Maine.

As plans come together, we find ourselves thinking about what a privilege it is to carry forward this tradition, 118 years in the making — a tradition that connects us to our deep roots with Bangor Theological Seminary, the predecessor to The BTS Center. Convocation invites us to draw upon the enduring wisdom of the generations of leaders who have come before us while exploring today's most urgent and compelling issues.

From its founding in 1814, Bangor Theological Seminary was an institution committed to creative innovation in the realms of education and ministry. Beginning with its orientation towards educating those potential ministers who, through life circumstances, were unlikely to be able to access theological education elsewhere, BTS evolved over time to include innovative programs like the Bangor Plan, which offered those without a bachelor's degree the opportunity for a theological education and ministerial formation. For two centuries, BTS retained an institutional focus on broadening the field of ministry to include those typically overlooked or excluded by traditional seminaries.

In 1905, President David Nelson Beach, his wife, Dora Freeman Beach, and the Reverend Charles Harbutt, superintendent of the Congregational Missionary Society of Maine, began to imagine a new kind of educational forum, one which would offer ministers and lay people serving rural churches the opportunity to learn alongside the students of Bangor Theological Seminary. The first "Convocation Week," held in 1905, brought together speakers and thinkers for an audience of ministers, students, and the general public. According to author Walter L. Cook, "Almost immediately attendance was astonishing: the gymnasium became a dormitory... and all accommodations were taxed to the full." Attendees came from Maine and beyond by boat, rail, carriage, and foot.

(Continued, page 2)



Photos from Collections of the Maine Historical Society, Coll. 2770. See photo captions on reverse.

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Over the years, speakers at Convocation have included an impressive roster of internationally known thought leaders, including Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Barbara Brown Taylor, Phyllis Tickle, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and many more. Convocation also traditionally included plenty of time for informal connections between participants and presenters as well as music (including, at one point, the Bangor Symphony Orchestra) and, in earlier years, denominational gatherings. Ministers — often those who were working in somewhat isolated, rural settings — celebrated the opportunity to make connections with colleagues from around the region, as well as to learn from presenters respected around the world. Convocations always included time for communal worship and the sharing of meals and conversation.

Though there were sometimes financial, public health, and political obstacles (one Convocation was canceled due to the Spanish flu in 1918 and another was postponed during World War II in the 1940s), the annual tradition has continued onward over the decades, altering through the years to fit the specific needs of the moment. What began as a week-long gathering gradually shortened to two or three days of programming, yet the offerings remained robust and continued to draw a dynamic group of both participants and presenters. As Bangor Theological Seminary continued to iterate its offerings creatively — eventually adding a Portland campus and, finally, choosing to cease its operation as a degree-granting institution — that creativity also infused Convocation.

When Bangor Theological Seminary closed in 2013 and, at the same time, The BTS Center took shape and grew from the Seminary roots, the desire to keep the spirit of Convocation alive remained strong among the BTS community, both alumni and others. Still today, the commitment to fostering community and learning for those in ministry remains at the core of this offering.

“Over the past three years, through three online Convocations, a whole new set of possibilities has emerged,” notes Rev. Dr. Allen Ewing-Merrill, Executive Director of The BTS Center, “as ministers and others from across the United States and around the world have been able to gather in a way which would likely be impossible in person.”

Last year, in 2022, for example, participants and presenters joined from across the globe, including the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Canada, to participate in a program that would have been unimaginable to the conveners of the first Convocation over a century ago. With diverse voices and modalities, including dynamic preaching, music, breakout room conversations, and the live recording of a podcast episode, Convocation 2022 embodied the theme of “Imagination and Collective Liberation for a Climate-Changed World.” As one participant shared, “It was an amazing two days of inspiration, informative content, uplifting music, and moments of spiritual connection.”

In this new iteration of The BTS Center, we have been careful to honor the deep roots of Convocation — more than a century of innovative lectures, lively gatherings, and knowledge offered to all, regardless of academic credentials or religious titles. As we have begun to focus on *spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world*, we celebrate that our mission and values are a direct legacy of the innovation, democratic learning, and imagination of those who forged the first Convocation and the many which have come after.

This year’s Convocation theme — “Kinship: Re-Weaving the Great Web of Belonging” — seems particularly appropriate given the rich legacy of connection woven through the history of Convocation. Although climate change was not a known entity when Convocation began in 1905, we are grateful for the forethought and imagination that allow us, these many years later, to gather and commune with one another in this climate-changed world. We hope you will join us for this year’s Convocation, as we take our place in a long line of faithful and prophetic leaders, with our hearts and minds centered in the present and our eyes oriented to the future.

¹Cook, Walter L., *Bangor Theological Seminary: A Sesquicentennial History* (Orono, ME: University of Maine Press, 1971), p. 62

Join us for Convocation 2023

Kinship: Re-Weaving the Great Web of Belonging

Thursday & Friday, September 28 & 29, 2023

In-person, Hallowell, Maine

The BTS Center invites you to **Convocation 2023** — this year, taking place as an in-person event at the beautiful Maple Hill Inn and Conference Center in Hallowell, Maine.

Over the course of two days, we will gather to learn and explore, to nurture a sense of community, and to seek respite and renewal.

We look forward to welcoming **Victoria Loorz**, author and co-founder of the Wild Church Network, and **John Bear Mitchell**, musician, storyteller, and citizen of the Penobscot Nation, who will inspire us with wisdom and guide us to reimagine our relationships with all living beings and with the earth. **Rev. Liz Fulmer**, queer pastor, recording artist, and musical storyteller, will join us as our Convocation Musician.

Convocation 2023 will include music, poetry, and ritual; plenary sessions and small-group conversation; opportunities to engage with nature; and both embodied and contemplative practice.

Register now at Convocation2023.org



Victoria Loorz



John Bear Mitchell



Rev. Liz Fulmer

"Thank you for bringing into being this wonderful blend of ministry and preaching, prayers and songs, opportunities for deep dives and for reflection in small groups. The synergy between the individual presenters and Convocation leaders/facilitators and participants was wonderful."

— Convocation 2022 Participant

"It was a drink from a deep well, and it was the village gathered to that oasis. There were needful amounts of respite and challenge both, in service of all that is holy and embodied in Creation."

— Convocation 2022 Participant

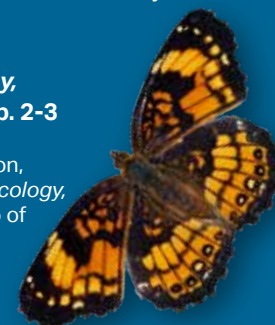
"I attended the last Convocation in Bangor years ago. I remember the promise that Bangor would continue and not to despair. I am so impressed with what you have all accomplished. I have been out of ministry for nine years and I now feel inspired to re-engage my calling again."

— Convocation 2022 Participant

Interconnectedness. It's one of those insights that's simultaneously obvious and easy to miss, astonishing and easy to take for granted, all at once. The reality to which ecology points us is one in which our very lives depend on other species. Our bodies are built of atoms and molecules that have passed through countless generations of other organisms. The oxygen we breathe is the exhalations of millions and millions of years of growing plants. Ecology asks us to see that all of us, all living things, are woven together by visible and invisible flows of energy, matter, nutrients, even the plant gametes that the checkerspot butterflies outside my window are ferrying from one coneflower to the next. In the moments when I manage to pause and really notice that reality, I feel thoroughly wonderstruck. Too often, though, I don't notice it. Interconnectedness is the fundamental nature of our existence, but it's easy not to see it. I wonder sometimes if it's the very boundedness of our bodies — the embodied illusion that we're somehow discrete entities — that makes it easy for us to believe instead in our own autonomy, our separateness.

— **Letters from the Ecotone: Ecology, Theology, and Climate Change**, pp. 2-3

Rev. Andi Lloyd and Rev. Andy Nagy-Benson, co-authors of *Letters from the Ecotone: Ecology, Theology, and Climate Change*, will be two of our Creative / Contemplative Immersion leaders at Convocation 2023.



The BTS Center offers truly visionary projects at the intersection of faith leadership and creation care. Through a unique blend of thoughtful conversations and engaged practices, BTS is moving our hearts, minds, and bodies into healing partnerships with our climate-changed world.

I believe the first step in this critical partnership is to fall in love with nature and remember our kinship with the more-than-human world. I had the honor and privilege of guiding the first online EcoSpiritual Leaders cohort, and I am thrilled to be traveling from my home in The Netherlands to Maine to share immersive nature experiences at The BTS Center's Convocation.

— **Kimberly Knight**, MDiv, ANFT Certified Nature Therapy Guide, Spiritual Care Provider, and Creative / Contemplative Immersion Leader



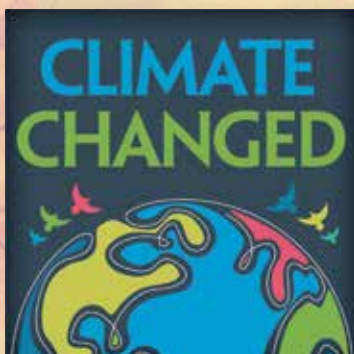
I am looking forward to exploring possibilities when we can let go of false binaries and hold paradox together — moving from either/or to both/and. I am looking forward to engaging our multidimensionality and wholeness as we tend to what is calling us into embrace.

— **Preeta Banerjee**, Ph.D., Hindu Chaplain at Tufts University and Creative / Contemplative Immersion Leader



THE **BTS** CENTER

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Co-hosted by Nicole Diroff and Ben Yosua-Davis, with producer Peterson Toscano, Season 2 of *Climate Changed* focuses on collective honesty and complicated hope in a climate-changed world. Guests include: Rob Shetterly, Susi Moser, Eileen Flanagan, Keisha McKenzie, Ray Buckley, Margaret Wheatley, Debra Rienstra, and Shanon Shah. Season 2 premieres this fall!

Listen and subscribe at climatechanged.podbean.com

Photo Captions

1. Dr. Charles Gilkey, Dr. James Pike, President Frederick Whittaker, Dr. Roland H. Bainton, and Dr. James T. Cleland, Convocation 1957
2. Worship at Convocation 2005
3. Participants and presenters share a meal at Convocation 1957
4. Opening Service, Convocation 1987
5. Rev. Dr. Yvonne Delk, Convocation 2000
6. Dr. Phyllis Tribble, Convocation 1983
7. Rev. Emilie M. Townes, Convocation 2002
8. Presenters, Convocation 1983

Our Mission

To catalyze spiritual imagination
with enduring wisdom for
transformative faith leadership.

Cover Illustration by David Bruggink, 2022
