



## Spiritual Leadership for a Climate-Changed World

"Maybe it's time to recognize that at the heart of our work is the need for those around us to be able to imagine a better world, to tell stories about it, to long for its realization. If we can imagine it, desire it, dream about it, it is so much more likely that we will put our energy and determination into making it reality...

"Bringing about the world we want to live in, the world we want to leave to our children is, substantially, the work of the imagination, or what educational reformer John Dewey describes as 'the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise'...

"As the writer and activist Naomi Klein put it, "There are no non-radical options left before us.' I believe imagination is the only thing we have that is — or could be — radical enough to get us through, provided it is accompanied, of course, by bravery, and by action."

- ROB HOPKINS, FROM WHAT IS TO WHAT IF







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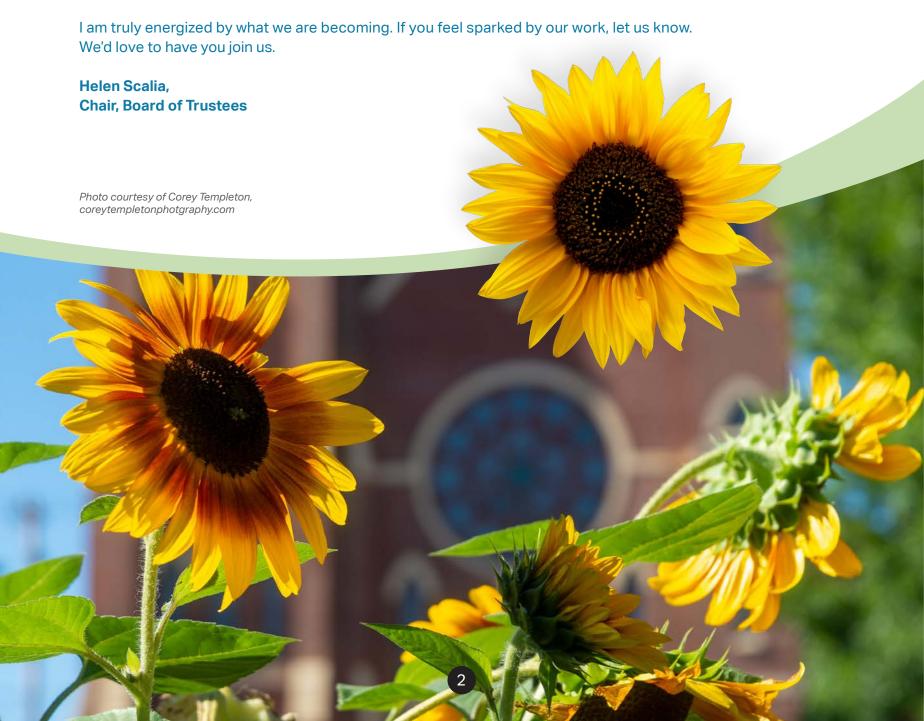
## Dear Friends,

This is the time of year when I like to take stock. Often, I'll draw from a list of questions to help shake up my thinking. One of my favorites is: What's energizing you? It's a reminder of the importance of following currents of electricity in my life and that energy can be generated by an accomplishment, an opportunity or, most often, a challenge.

In my seven years on The BTS Center's Board of Trustees, I've encountered all three. When I joined the board, The BTS Center had just made the transition from centuries-old educational institution to fledgling nonprofit. A challenge, indeed. Our collective energy was directed toward the monumental tasks of redefining our purpose and rebuilding an organization, and we succeeded.

Today, The BTS Center's compelling vision and clear mission are energizing me with fresh opportunities. Our commitment to spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world could not be more urgent and relevant in light of ever more devasting environmental events. Our growing staff of smart, talented professionals are designing and delivering unique offerings. The BTS Center's creative learning communities, thought-provoking conversations, and innovative research are reaching bigger and varied audiences across the US and beyond.

We are also acting on our commitment to greater diversity, equity and inclusion in all areas, from programs to finances to governance. This year, we welcomed three new trustees who bring perspectives from the worlds of public health, social justice and community organizing, and international human rights.





The BTS Center traces its roots back to 1814, with the founding of the former Bangor Theological Seminary. Although no longer a degree-awarding institution, today we seek to catalyze spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership. As we orient ourselves to the future, we celebrate our place in a long arc that extends back more than two centuries, with gratitude for our roots and appreciation for all who have stewarded and shaped this institution.

Over this past year, even in the midst of a pandemic, we have assembled a brilliant and creative staff team. We've welcomed three new members to our wise and committed Board of Trustees. We've adopted a new logo and organizational tagline. We've collaborated with an inspiring array of partners, and we've brought together leading thinkers, authors, theologians, artists, and practitioners for important programming focused on spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world.

So where do we go from here? As Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine Wilkinson suggest in their collection *All We Can Save:* "In some ways, we, humans, were not designed for a crisis this massive and all-encompassing. In other ways, we were made for this moment. What we do now is dream. From a foundation of science and community, we must imagine the future we want to live in, and the future we want to pass on, and every day do something to reel the dream closer to reality."

That's what we aim to do: Take a breath. Dream. Grasp ahold of science and community and prayer. Imagine a better future. And every day do something to reel the dream closer to reality. Will you join us?

With gratitude and hope,

Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill Executive Director



Convocation traces its roots all the way back to 1905, as a legacy program of the former Bangor Theological Seminary.

After the very first Convocation in 1905, a participant wrote to Dr. David Nelson Beach, then President of Bangor Seminary, "I doubt if in any city in New England in the past 20 years there has been gathered into one week so much of such value as these speakers have brought. This convocation ought to become permanent."

Permanent is a word that carries guite a lot of weight, but we are delighted to carry on this tradition, 116 years in the making, drawing upon the enduring wisdom of the generations of leaders who have come before us.

Over the course of three days in September 2021, we gathered for an online Convocation, exploring the theme "We Are God's Soil: Spiritual Leadership in a Climate-Changed World." Incorporating music, the arts, and contemplative practice, Convocation 2021 inspired and challenged us to ground our spiritual leadership in the common good and in the sacredness of our planetary home. Participants enjoyed a blend of online and offline experiences, which weaved together to facilitate learning, nurture respite, and deepen community.

One participant shared, "This event nourished my very hungry heart in a way few other things have this year. The space you made for naming and wrestling with grief, despair, and other challenges was vital, especially with the counterpoint of music, poetry, and prayer." Another wrote, "It challenged me, inspired me, and gave me hope in this grief-filled world."



Rev. Mariama White-Hammond



**Kaitlin Curtice** Conversationalist



Susanne Moser Conversationalist



Pax Ressler



William Morris Conversationalist



Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers Conversationalist

## From What Is to What If

Given the realities with which we live today — increasing inequality, climate change, political tensions, and racial uprisings — imagination is urgent and necessary in moving us toward the world we want to leave to our children. Yet we often struggle to articulate our own yearning and desire for the new in the face of the anxiety, hurdles, and potholes on the way to creating something hoped-for. What can help us to unlock our imaginations and unleash our creativity are companions on the journey, practices in community, wisdom from our faith traditions, and questions that evoke new and unexpected paths.

In the spring of 2021, The BTS Center gathered together a co-learning community of practice to engage imagination, to take the journey from acknowledging "what is" to imagining "what if?" Our time together drew upon the work of Rob Hopkins, writer, environmental activist, and founder of the Transition Movement, and others who inspire moral and ecological imagination, and was guided by a series of spiritually-based practices. Participants supported one another in imagining projects or endeavors that aimed to spark the imaginations of others in our communities.

As co-facilitator Rev. Alison Cornish says, "We were trying to build out aspects of imagination from a spiritual perspective — with storytelling, scripture, and practices. We were presenting opportunities for people to take risks, experiment, and give themselves permission to imagine things in a different way. We were taken by how willing people were to step into the newness. What they came back with was amazing."

During six 90-minute sessions, participants engaged in practices intended to build their imagination

muscles. On weeks when we were not gathering via Zoom, participants explored curated writings, podcasts, and other materials as a way of deepening understanding of the concepts and ideas related to opening to new possibilities. The facilitators, Rev. Alison Cornish and Rev. Maria Anderson-Lippert, also offered individual or team coaching as participants considered how to apply these ideas to their own communities.

Through shared readings and materials, conversation in group sessions, and a series of practices designed to inspire thinking and stretch imagination, participants were led to ask "what if?" questions relevant to their own contexts.

During the course of the program, participants had the opportunity to apply for a generous micro-grant from The BTS Center to support the manifestation of their idea for unlocking imagination in their congregations and communities. Six micro-grants were awarded, and the work is ongoing.

The project of Bismarck United Church of Christ in North Dakota (featured in the photographs) involved utilizing their outdoor space as a community gathering space, removing hedges that were separating the congregation from their neighbors, and replacing their landscaping with native, drought-resistant plants.

"I had a chance to visit all of the grantees in Maine. What's been reinforced for me is that a very small amount of money can go a long way in opening up the space for experimentation. How can congregations be pollinators to one another and also to The BTS Center (to use ecological language)? I think that this is an area really ripe for potential."

—REV. ALISON CORNISH

"The book was an excellent springboard into the practice of reorganizing our minds to imagine a better world, and the group work allowed us to begin turning our new imaginations into solid plans. The surprise grant funding at the end of the program is what made it possible for all the parts to come together. I will carry what I learned in this program throughout my ministry and life."

- REV. GRETCHEN DEEG. BISMARCK UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST (NORTH DAKOTA)



Members of Bismarck United Church of Christ imagined new ways to engage with their neighborhood by hosting a Neighborhood Block Party and other outside gatherings.



#### **SPOTLIGHT:**

#### Dr. Natasha DeJarnett, Member of The BTS Center Board of Trustees



Dr. Natasha DeJarnett is an assistant professor in the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute at the University of Louisville, Division of Environmental Medicine, where she researches the health impacts of extreme heat exposure and environmental health disparities. In addition, she is a professorial lecturer in Environmental and Occupational Health at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. Dr. DeJarnett joined The BTS Center Board in 2021 after connecting with us as a presenter in our study of *Rooted & Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*, a collection which includes an essay she authored. Of that initial experience, Dr. DeJarnett notes, "To witness spiritual leaders meaningfully engaging around issues of climate and justice was transformative for me."

As a climate researcher and a person of faith, Dr. DeJarnett is especially enthusiastic about the ways in which her work with The BTS Center helps her integrate these aspects of her life. As she says: "I am a climate and health researcher. This field invigorates me with professional purpose, and I feel great opportunity in addressing our world's greatest threat to health and equity — climate change. However, I have long lived my life keeping my public facing work separate from my personal spiritual life. The BTS Center has given me a space where my personal and professional lives are deeply intertwined, and I am able to experience enlightenment and transformative growth. It feels wonderful to be in this space where I can bring my full

self — professionally and spiritually — where my talents are completely and authentically welcomed, and I have the opportunity to learn and continue to grow."

Dr. De Jarnett also expresses excitement at the work of The BTS Center in empowering spiritual leaders to learn and innovate at the intersection of spiritual leadership and ecological imagination. She highlights the staff and board members as leaders who are willing to face the challenges of a climate-changed world with courage, conviction, and compassion. As she says, "Given the crises we face in the changing religious landscape, along with climate change, the racial reckoning, the COVID pandemic, and the interconnectedness of it all, we have the fierce urgency of now to boldly lead transformative action."

"Courage, conviction, and compassion is what spiritual leadership looks like in a climate-changed world to me. To whom much is given, much is required. This verse has echoed throughout my life; in times where I have been called to serve, in times where I have been challenged to grow, this verse has echoed subtly and loudly to guide my path. When I think of the incredible gift that this earth is to us, I think of this verse. Further, this verse has inspired me with courage that led me on my path to address climate change with my unique skills and talents, the conviction to stand true to our beliefs and our moral responsibility to halt climate change, and compassion to see the injustice imposed by climate change and work steadfastly to give voice to those who are disproportionately burdened."







Rev. Doug Clark, a 1974 graduate of Bangor Theological Seminary, was ordained in 1975 and served UCC congregations in Maine, Massachusetts, and Southern California as a settled pastor. He transitioned to intentional interim ministry in 2001 and served congregations in the Washington, DC metro area and in Connecticut until his retirement in 2017. He is married to the Rev. Dr. Mary Moschella, who is the Roger Squire Professor of Pastoral Care at Yale Divinity School. Doug is passionate about the role of spirituality in addressing the climate emergency and is deeply committed to intergenerational responses to climate change. He is the co-host of a podcast on creation care and climate justice with Jenna Van Donselaar, a recent graduate of Yale Divinity School and an activist with Young Evangelicals for Climate Action.

In reflecting on his experiences with The BTS Center, Doug says: "Spiritual leadership in a climate-changed world has been an important theme for me since the fall of 2018, when I first read the 6th report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the 4th national climate assessment. Like many others, I'm persuaded that anthropogenic global warming is both an existential and a spiritual crisis, and I'm grateful for the ways in which The BTS Center is addressing this crisis." He appreciates the ways in which The BTS Center programming offers inspiration and resources for faith leaders in these unprecedented times. As Doug notes, "I do think that one

key component of spiritual leadership in a climate-changed world is the ability, and the passion, to help one's congregants read the book of scripture and the book of nature carefully together, not just intellectually, but also physically and emotionally."

Doug has brought a thoughtful and nuanced approach to the programs in which he has participated, and we particularly appreciate this working definition of a robust eco-spirituality which he offers: "It's whole-hearted engagement with the sacredness of Creation, and the mystery of Creator/G-d, through experiences and emotions of gratitude and wonder, of humility and remorse, for the purpose of healing the world."

We are grateful to have Doug as part of our BTS community, as a member of our Program Advisory Committee, and as a co-creative participant in many of our programs.

#### **SPOTLIGHT:**

#### Peterson Toscano, Program Consultant



As a contributor to the anthology *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*, Peterson Toscano originally connected with The BTS Center as a presenter in one of our programs. He was immediately impressed with and intrigued by the work of The BTS Center — and thus began an ongoing collaboration as a Program Consultant. As someone who has spent decades involved in the arts, queer biblical scholarship, and climate activism, Peterson brings fresh and engaging ideas to our programs, including creating workshops for our Leadership Commons and helping to develop our new podcast *Climate Changed*.

When speaking about the work of The BTS Center, Peterson notes that "each program offers a balance of honesty and humanity... There is something prophetic about the work which exposes society's flaws and also calls us to pursue a better way of co-creating. Curiosity feels palpable among The BTS Center staff, along with an openness to hear from others and to allow the words and actions of others to make an impact."

In addition to his work for The BTS Center, Peterson is involved in a wide variety of initiatives for justice, including hosting *Climate Change Radio*, writing and performing one-person comedies, and working on LGBTQ justice issues. He has also become something of a TikTok celebrity in South Africa, where he currently lives with his husband, the writer Glen Retief.

When it comes to the work of spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world, Peterson reflects, "Spiritual leaders are not simply clergy. In fact, it is in the midst of an emergency that we see leaders rise from all segments of society to take on their roles. Spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world requires collaboration, deep empathy, and the willingness to question not only how we live but how we think about ourselves."

We are so grateful to have Peterson's thoughtful, playful presence on our BTS Center team.



Photo courtesy of Boston Food Forest Coalition

## Research Collaborative

In the fall of 2021, The BTS Center officially launched our much-anticipated Research Collaborative, a program that had been in formation for nearly a year. With this project, we are convening a multi-sector group of leaders from organizations across northern New England who together are exploring the question, "How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?"

Beginning with an opening retreat held in October 2021, participants have committed to monthly gatherings that rotate on a three-month cycle between retreats, online meetups with guest experts, and cohort gatherings, all interspersed with reading, reflection, and contextual integration. This first phase of a multi-year project has elicited much thoughtfulness and imagination from participants regarding what it means to cultivate an ecological imagination that might transform existing paradigms of organizational life in response to an era of climate devastation.

Participating organizations include Hour Exchange Portland, Waterville Creates, Boston Food Forest Coalition, Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, Montreal City Mission, Ashwood Waldorf School, and St. Joseph's College of Maine — and since this is intended to be a co-learning community, The BTS Center is participating fully as the eighth organization in the cohort.

This is important work, because we believe that climate devastation is not merely a problem for scientists and

activists, but a symptom of the foundational cultural and spiritual structures of our society. If systems like consumer capitalism, industrial modernity, and colonial domination are the root causes of our current crisis, then every organization has something important to offer in this moment.

We are excited to gather organizational partners who share our hope for a new way of embodying the best version of ourselves in response to our planet's deep need, and who reflect the earth's wisdom in their day-to-day life and work. We believe these learnings will be foundational as we focus our programmatic attention on spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world.

Of the opening months of the Research Collaborative, The BTS Center's Director of Applied Research, Ben Yosua-Davis, says: "We are creating a laboratory for emergence to explore this question, where wisdom can be grown from the soil of our experience as organizational leaders. From education to prisoner advocacy, from the arts to agriculture, the members of our co-learning community bring a rich depth of wisdom in a wide variety of contexts; along with a deep desire to ensure that they are meeting this pivotal moment in our planetary history."

Now five months in, we are delighted by the common ground shared by people from very different contexts and are looking forward to how our insights from this research can guide the work of everyone who cares about spiritual leadership for a climate changed-world.

Photo courtesy of Montreal City Mission



## Season of Eco-Grief

As the consequences of climate change have continued to grow in severity and frequency, many of us are noticing a corresponding increase in the emotional impact of this changed world. At The BTS Center, we are recognizing a growing sense of climate grief that is starting to be named across many different communities. As a way of bringing climate grief more fully into our conversations about spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world, in the fall of 2021, The BTS Center embarked on a season of eco-grief programming consisting of five program offerings:

- Solastalgia: Homesick in a Climate-Changed World: a public online event naming the sense of loss being experienced by so many and offering readings, reflections, ritual, and music
- Stillpoint: weekly, facilitated contemplative online gatherings designed to "tune in and touch in" to ecological grief, co-facilitated by Rev. Alison Cornish and Rev. Ash Temin
- Lament with Earth: in collaboration with The Many, a Chicago-based group of artists, musicians, and liturgists, we are creating five seasonal online spaces for liturgy and ritual of lamentation
- Words for a Dying World Book Study: a four-week online cohort delving into climate grief from the perspective of voices from across the global church, co-facilitated by Aram Mitchell and Rev. Ash Temin
- Stories of Grief and Courage: A Conversation with Hannah Malcolm and Anupama Ranawana, editor and contributor of Words for a Dying World, a public online event addressing our losses and understanding climate grief through a theological lens, led by Aram Mitchell and Rev. Nicole Diroff

Although the naming of climate grief may be recent, participants showed great interest in our programs, even from those who previously had not thought to name their emotions around climate change as grief. So many participants expressed their gratitude for having spaces in which to be in community around this grief, and many people participated in more than one of these offerings.

Rev. Ash Temin, Communications Manager at The BTS Center, who co-facilitated Stillpoint and the Words for a Dying World book study group, noted that "these groups have underlined for me that there is a longing in so many of us to have our sense of grief affirmed — to know we are not alone, to be able to name our losses and to lament the changes we see in our world, even if it is not recognized by our capitalist consumer society."

This series of programming affirmed our sense that spaces for climate grief are both necessary and scarce, and so The BTS Center staff will continue to hold ecological grief as a thread running through many of our future program offerings. The collective nerve which was touched (and, hopefully, soothed) through this curated selection of programming is powerful, and the need for spaces to name our grief is one which we anticipate will continue to grow as climate change impacts become more pronounced and severe. Many of those who participated in these programs are ministers and spiritual leaders who have expressed both a deep appreciation for these spaces for themselves and a desire to bring this work back to their own congregations and communities.

"Stillpoint gave me a chance to pause and recenter, so I could listen to the climate grief in my heart and soul. I'm grateful for the chance to tend that grief in an intentional community." - ABBY MOHAUPT, STILLPOINT PARTICIPANT

10

# Upcoming Events & Programs

As we look back at all we have brought to life over the past two years, we carry lessons learned and that same creative energy into our endeavors for the coming year and beyond. Some of our projects-in-process for 2022 include:

- · More book study groups, retreats, and public conversations
- Climate Changed, a podcast hosted by Rev. Nicole Diroff, Program Director at The BTS Center, and Ben Yosua-Davis, Director of Applied Research at The BTS Center, debuting in mid 2022
- Leadership Commons, our resource library of workshops, facilitator guides, and opportunities for ongoing learning for faith leaders and their communities, which will having a growing presence on our website
- Lament with Earth, a continuation of the series begun in 2021 with The Many, a Chicago-based group of musicians and liturgists
- Convocation 2022, continuing the tradition of learning, respite, and community

Madeleine Jubilee Saito is a cartoonist and illustrator living on Duwamish land in Seattle, WA. She is the creative director and operations lead at The All We Can Save Project, through which she has collaborated with The BTS Center.

Credit: Madeleine Jubilee Saito, madeleinejubileesaito.net



#### **EVERGREEN**

Lilace Mellin Guignard is a poet, author, educator, and outdoor adventurer who lives in western Pennsylvania and recently collaborated with The BTS Center on a day-long online retreat entitled "Learning the Language of Wild Paradox." This poem first appeared in Paterson Literary Review 42 (2014-2015).

and the poets are at their windows
because it is their job for which
they are paid nothing every Friday afternoon.
—from "Monday" by Billy Collins

The day after Christmas, 2006, and nowhere in the lower forty-eight is below thirty degrees Fahrenheit except, my husband reports, a spot in Maine.

I can be upbeat. Children in northern climes with new bikes are out riding them, spinning circles in circles.

But how can I ignore those tykes who stand on porches holding sleds, their hats (toboggans ironically) in their hands.

Really, it is not today that worries me, an unremarkable gray without threat or promise, same birds at the feeder.

Neither does tomorrow (a word my son knows only means "not now") but some tomorrow in the future.

How will any child believe in a jolly giver-of-gifts wearing a fur coat by a fire at the icy top of the world once the glaciers are puddles in our textbooks?

Regardless, the poets will be at their windows finding new images—maybe something a pretty shade of green to compare the sky to,

pretty if we can just divorce memory from emotion and approach the new dawn, whatever its color, with the heart of a child on Christmas Eve

who, looking back, knows he could have let go of the cat's tail sooner, feels bad that she busted her brother's favorite train,

yet hopes a larger forgiveness presides. Yes, we poets will always be at our windows, except when at our children's bedsides singing, shushing, singing.



## Our Donors

We are grateful for the financial support of the following individuals and organizations. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this list. Please email info@thebtscenter.org with any errors or omissions.

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### Our Partners

Our work and vision rely deeply on collaborations with individuals and organizations. Over the past two years, we have been fortunate to work with the following partners:

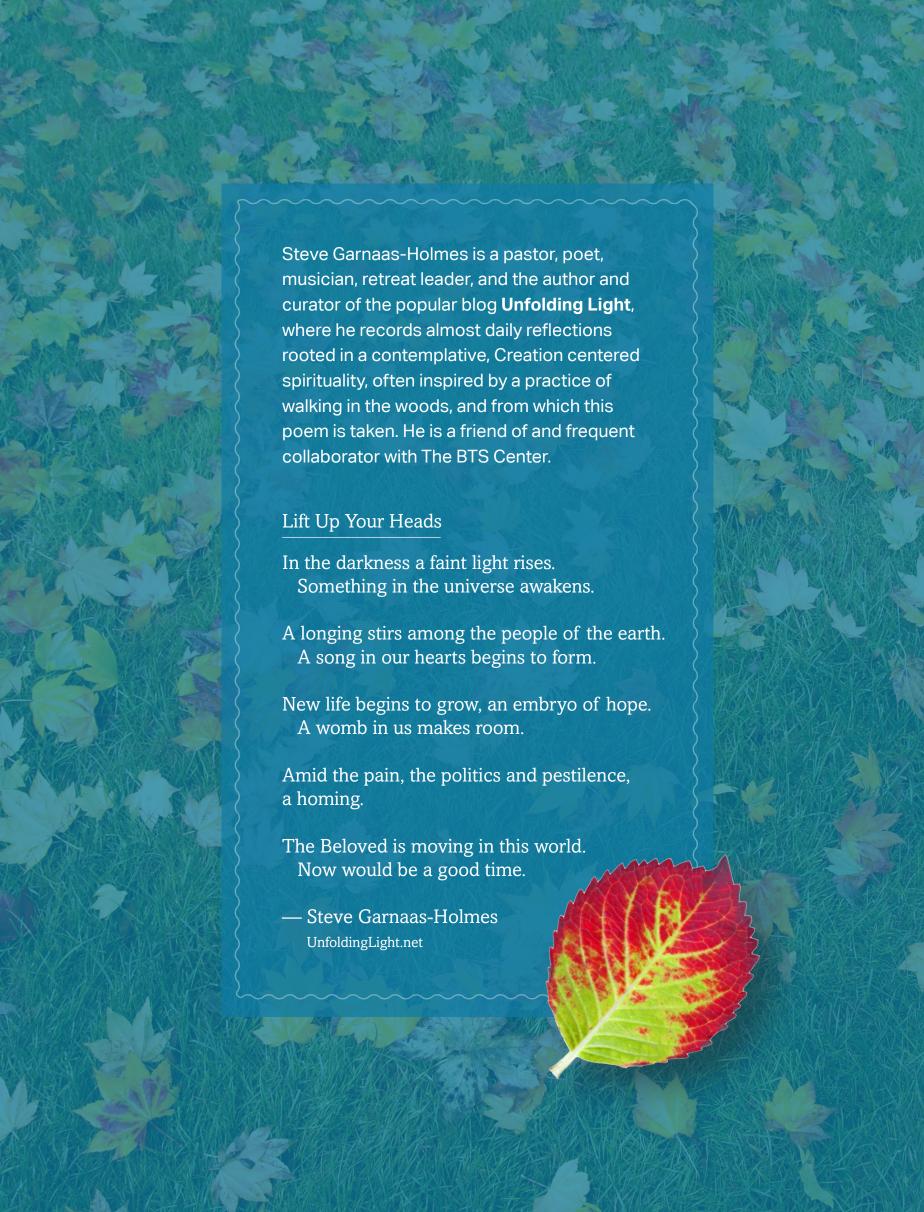
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#### You are invited.

**Yes — you!** As we continue to focus on spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world — as we aim to catalyze spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership — we are grateful for our many friends, program participants, partners, and donors, and we extend a warm invitation to join in this work. Here are a few suggestions:

- Visit thebtscenter.org and explore Upcoming Programs.
- Check out our Leadership Commons, Video Library, and Earthbound Practices all at thebtscenter.org for resources you can use within your faith community or for your own personal growth.
- Support the work of The BTS Center with a financial gift. We are grateful for your support.
- Share our website or this report with a friend or colleague who may be interested in the work of The BTS Center.



#### OUR MISSION:

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

#### OUR VISION:

Human hearts **renewed**, justice **established**, and creation **restored** 



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CENTER

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