

# Upwelling

Connections and Reflections from The BTS Center

August / 2022

Welcome to *Upwelling*, the inaugural issue of The BTS Center's new, 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 chosen to name this publication *Upwelling*, which is quite a specific ecological term in coastal ecosystems such as our own, where winds blow strongly and frequently across the surface of the ocean near where it meets the land. 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.

For those of us awake to spiritual metaphor, upwelling speaks of the Spirit which moves across our own beings — agitating, provoking, inviting — preventing us from stagnating and pushing us to make room for new life to arise. That life comes from the mysterious Deep, a life source that is both sustaining and not fully known. As in the creative process of Genesis, upwelling evokes the movement of the Divine who lives and breathes through creation. This process is a constant dance of creative movement, one which offers a nourishing agitation and imaginative disturbance.

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.

## From Deep Roots, an Imaginative Future Emerges

*G. Jeffrey MacDonald*

Before The BTS Center was born in 2013, its predecessor institution spent 199 years weathering all kinds of adversity in pursuit of a single goal: to supply rural churches of northern Maine with theologically educated leaders.

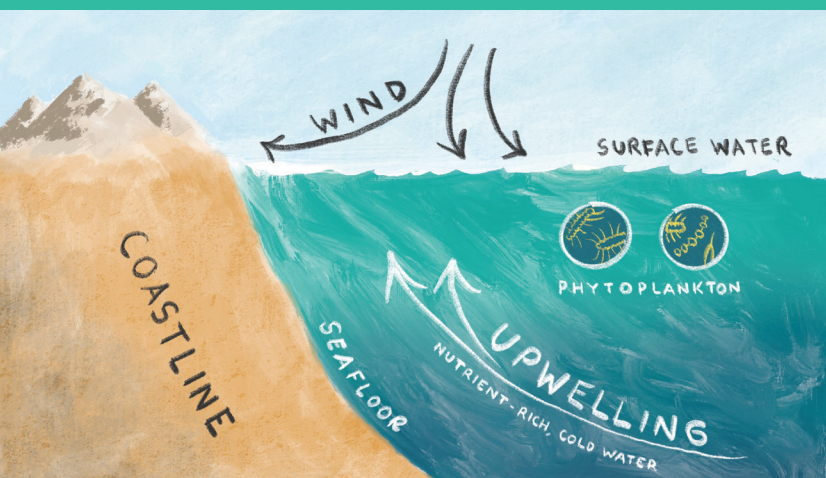
Frontier conditions, perennially tight budgets, disadvantaged students, and cash-strapped rural congregations — none of it shook Bangor Theological Seminary (BTS) off its visionary moorings. Instead, these defining challenges shaped the character of the seminary as pragmatic, unpretentious, and resilient for the sake of its core constituencies and mission.

Now, nine years after the seminary closed and gave rise to The BTS Center, the seminary's history is not fading into the past. Instead, The BTS Center's stakeholders are actively engaging it anew as a strategic asset. In so doing, they're putting the power of tradition behind today's work of developing spiritual leaders for a climate-changed world. And they're building momentum for greater impact.

*"The seminary was willing to work on things and with people that were less popular, less in demand, seen by others as too poor, too uneducated, too rural," said Helen Scalia, chair of The BTS Center's Board of Trustees. "In relation to climate, the planet is just like that — it needs a voice. To me, [the Center's climate focus] is a continuation of that seminary value."*

The seminary's history increasingly informs how The BTS Center approaches its work. In 2020, for example, a "Roots Project" explored the history of Bangor Theological Seminary — its ethos, its core values, its key points of decision — and what it means for the work of The BTS Center. Through this exploration, Director of Applied Research Ben Yosua-Davis identifies generosity, collaboration, and experimentation among BTS hallmarks. These are now also celebrated as enduring values that The BTS Center carries forward.

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More history-embracing opportunities are now coming into focus. Center staffers plan to explore what shareable expertise might reside in small Maine congregations with historic ties to Bangor Theological Seminary. And the seminary's engagement with Wabanaki people over two centuries will be explored in coming years for what it has to teach spiritual leaders about cross-cultural relationships, healing wounds, and caring for the Earth.

*"We're really trying to attend to the wisdom present with our indigenous siblings," said The BTS Center's Executive Director Allen Ewing-Merrill. "Bangor Seminary was located on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki people, and we've tried to begin to develop some relationships with our indigenous neighbors... We're thinking about what decolonizing might look like."*

Faith-based institutions always play big roles in consequential social movements, especially when they link action to their time-honored values, according to Jim Antal, a climate change activist, advisor to The BTS Center, and former Massachusetts Conference Minister and President for the United Church of Christ.

Tapping institutional history is a key part of releasing that power in Antal's view. And with The BTS Center, that means being innovative. When small church pastors in the Massachusetts Conference needed direction to help them be innovative in their settings, he always knew where to point them.

*"If you wanted to understand who was on top of the best resources, the best approaches, the best innovation in small church ministry: go to Bangor Seminary," the Rev. Dr. Antal recalled telling them. "See what they're teaching, publishing and emphasizing... At Bangor, there was a willingness to innovate."*

Today, that spirit of innovation is oriented toward some of the biggest concerns of our world. "Creation restored" is codified in The BTS Center's vision statement and helps frame today's programming, which digs beneath the surface of environmental crises to foster deeper understandings, adaptation, and healing.

*"When we can address climate change from a spiritual and religious perspective, it releases the moral and ethical power of people to really get at the roots of the problems that have brought us to this point in the first place," said the Rev. Dr. Leah Schade, a Lexington Theological Seminary professor and a BTS Center workshop leader for eco-preaching. "The BTS Center has been able to unleash all of that power."*

Today's re-engagement with the seminary's past comes as The BTS Center is focused more than ever on the future. Whether it's convening a research collaborative, exploring environmental grief through a series of collaborative programs,

convening a Small Church Leadership Community, or hosting book studies and retreats, the work involves expanding imagination. Participants are challenged to think beyond consumerism and conventional metrics for organizational success. They're led to shed delusions that ultimately hamper progress, such as fantasies about endless growth or griefless change.

Responding to the climate crisis on a spiritual level needs to be experimental, in part to discover what works to transform systems and behaviors. Though most seminaries were not known historically for experimentation, Bangor's distinctiveness in that respect inspires a bold legacy at the Center today.

Described by one early 19th-century trustee as "an experiment" from inception, Bangor Theological Seminary tested how to organize and run rural ministry collaboratives. It pioneered a forerunner program for what became clinical pastoral education. It forged the envelope-pushing "Bangor Plan," which enabled students to obtain an undergraduate degree while preparing for ministry. This culture of experimentation arguably played a role in enabling the decision to close in 2013, at a time when assets could still be rolled into a new, timely, not-yet-defined venture.

The BTS Center carries the innovation honed over the history of Bangor Theological Seminary forward in its work today. For example, applied research seeks to fund what isn't grant-funded elsewhere, such as what ecological imagination looks like in organizational life and studies on what moves congregants to action when they hear eco-sermons. One initiative brings together small congregations to cultivate imagination and resilience in their communities. Another program hosts retreats for faith leaders, including one this year on spiritual ecology and leadership.

*"We have been very inspired by what's developing in the field of alternative models of education, which tend to fit more in the zone of continuing education and defining leadership in a very broad way," said Program Director Rev. Nicole Diroff. "Especially in creating opportunities for stepping away — it could be for a couple of hours in a program or a multi-day offering — to reorient to what is most important."*

The BTS Center now builds on the momentum of an innovative culture that accrued over 199 years in Bangor. This force lives on largely through the endowment-supported work of developing courageously imaginative spiritual leaders. And it shows no signs of slowing. That legacy is regarded as an asset worth remembering often.

*"Carrying forward the legacy that is entrusted to the leaders of The BTS Center comes with opportunity," the Rev. Ewing-Merrill said. "I consider it to be a sacred responsibility to carefully and prayerfully steward the legacy of this organization, oriented toward the future — not for the sake of The BTS Center, and not even primarily for the sake of the church, but for the sake of the world."*

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G. Jeffrey MacDonald is a widely published religion journalist, United Church of Christ pastor, and author of *Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-Time Clergy* and *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul*.

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## When I Wake in the Night

Inspired by Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things"  
by Aram Mitchell

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and our children's lives may be...*

*I roll over, go back to sleep, and I dream  
of the pelicans and their awkward flops into the sea.  
And how it makes me laugh  
to see them soaring, at first, with prehistoric grace.  
Then see them diving with what, I'm fooled to think, must be precision.  
Then see them slap the water in a silly crumple  
of wings and waves and hunger.*

*And silliness and despair wed in my dreams  
and make awkward babies  
who have feathers for fingers and anchors for feet;  
who grow up tickling everything they touch;  
who move with big slow deliberate steps.*

*And I wake in the morning  
with a new gravity in my heart  
and a salty smile on my face.*

Aram Mitchell serves as The BTS Center's  
Director of Partnerships & Formation.



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Thursday & Friday, October 6-7 • Online

Theme: **Imagination and Collective  
Liberation for a Climate-Changed World**

Learn more: [Convocation2022.org](https://Convocation2022.org)

Confirmed presenters include:



**Cole Arthur Riley**, author of *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*, creator of Black Liturgies



**Rob Hopkins**, activist, author of *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*



**Ched Myers**, activist, theologian, educator, author of several books, including *Watershed Discipleship*



**Reggie Harris**, innovative guitarist, fearlessly creative vocalist, and engaging storyteller



**Veronica Miles**, Professor of Homiletics at Wesley Theological Seminary, author of *Embodied Hope*

## Recent Retreats Nurture Ecological Imagination

In early June, The BTS Center partnered with Auburn Seminary to host "Spiritual Ecology for Spiritual Leaders," a four-day retreat on site in Portland, Maine for a diverse group of early-career faith leaders and others who are working for justice in communal contexts. The retreat offered a time of deliberate engagement with each other, with the Earth, and with stories of our collective spiritual ecology.

In the past few months, The BTS Center also has offered an in-person overnight retreat for our Research Collaborative Co-Learning Community as well as two in-person Wonder and Wander retreats, one at Wells Reserve and the other at Gilsland Farm Audubon Center. We are grateful for these opportunities to share time together in person, while we remain committed to offering online programs through which many more may join us.





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97 India Street  
Portland, ME 04101  
207.774.5212  
[thebtscenter.org](http://thebtscenter.org)

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**Our Mission** — To catalyze spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership.

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## You are invited.

As we continue to focus on spiritual leadership for a climate changed world, we are grateful for our many friends, program participants, partners, and donors, and we extend a warm invitation to join in this work.

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