

# Upwelling

Connections and Reflections from The BTS Center

VOLUME 2 • ISSUE 1

Spring / 2023

Welcome to the Spring 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.



Thinking metaphorically, imagine the Spirit moving in our midst — agitating, provoking, inviting — preventing us from stagnating and pushing us to make room for new life to arise. 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.

## Rigorous and Reverent Curiosity: The BTS Center Embraces Research

With our roots in the former Bangor Theological Seminary, an institution of higher education that served Maine for two centuries, The BTS Center has always had an understanding that our work is rooted in research with an eye to grounded, real-world application. As we've expanded our programming over the past few years, research has continued to be a pillar of our work in new and imaginative ways.

The BTS Center has begun to articulate an intention to approach our work with a posture of "rigorous and reverent curiosity." We use this phrase frequently: *rigorous*, because we aim to bring the discipline of quantitative and qualitative research to our programs, asking important questions, surfacing stories, collecting data, drawing conclusions, and sharing our findings; and *reverent* because we understand this work is sacred. We ask curious questions not simply because we are interested, but also because there is a divine urgency, a sacred calling to this work of cultivating and nurturing spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world. So, with many programmatic initiatives, we aim to articulate a particular curiosity, a particular quality of experimentation, that we wish to pursue.

Beginning in 2021, The BTS Center Research Collaborative convened a cross-sector group of leaders from organizations across northern New England and Quebec to explore the question, "How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?" Representatives of the seven organizations that made up the Research Collaborative Co-Learning Community engaged in retreats, cohort group sessions, and online gatherings to explore together the possibilities of fostering ecological imagination in their particular organizations. The Research Collaborative, spearheaded by our Director of Applied Research, Ben Yosua-Davis, concluded their work in late 2022. The insights and learnings brought forth by this initiative will continue to inform the work of The BTS Center in the months and years to come.

(Continued, page 2)

(Continued, from page 1)

In addition to the Research Collaborative, our programmatic initiatives with a particular research lens include two programs in particular: our EcoPreacher Cohort and our Small Church Leadership Community. Adopting this orientation towards “rigorous and reverent curiosity,” we’re integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods into our program approach, enabling us to bring a deeper

understanding to our own future programs — as well as to share these learnings with other organizations interested in our ecological lens.

Our first year-long EcoPreacher Cohort will finish in May 2023, and in June, we’ll embark on the second Cohort of our Small Church Leadership Community.

## An Interview with Ben Yosua-Davis, The BTS Center’s Director of Applied Research

Recently The BTS Center’s Communications Manager, Rev. Ash Temin, sat down with Ben Yosua-Davis, Director of Applied Research, to hear a bit about his experience in leading The BTS Center’s research initiatives.

**Ash Temin:** How did you first come to be involved with The BTS Center? Was research always part of your role?

**Ben Yosua-Davis:** My first connection with The BTS Center was actually as a podcaster. For five years, I hosted a podcast called *Reports from the Spiritual Frontier*, which interviewed about one hundred people who were forming a community on the edges of



Christendom. The BTS Center came on as a sponsor during its last season, and from there, I had an opportunity to write an essay in the final issue of *Bearings*, which was The BTS Center’s online magazine at the time.

My first major project as a consultant was a “Roots” report for The BTS Center, focusing on the story of the history of Bangor Theological Seminary — not just a dry recitation of facts, but about the patterns, parables, and cautions that we could take with us in our work as the Seminary’s successor organization. The story of the Seminary is utterly remarkable. It was founded to provide students who would be considered too poor, too old, or too uneducated for seminary with a theological education, sending them back out into isolated rural communities that may have otherwise not received trained leadership. They held to that mission with almost incomprehensible tenacity and resourcefulness — they nearly closed seven times in their first one hundred years — and I am continually inspired and challenged to think of the ways that I get to stand in that heritage.

**AT:** How did the idea for the Research Collaborative come about, and how has it evolved?

**BYD:** It began with curiosity. I had presented the idea of ecological imagination to The BTS Center Board of Trustees with the idea that our climate-changed world was calling not just for more solar panels, but for a new type of imagination. From here, we began to wonder, what would it look like to explore the idea of ecological imagination with other people who shared our curiosity? What would it look like to do this with a cross-sector group of organizations, most of whom were not religious and none of which were congregations? And what would it look like to enmesh this in a rigorous research process that would allow us to share what we learned with others in ways that were both specific and grounded?

Answering these questions took a *lot* of time. I think I still have about ten drafts on my computer of our first two-page concept paper because we were constantly coming up against the ways that our language and our ways of thinking and seeing were so bound up in Western, Enlightenment-born, mechanistic models. From here, we came up with our guiding question, “How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?” (I’m pretty sure we discussed every single word in that question!) and the decision to do our research in the form of a Co-Learning Community. However, the Research Collaborative was evolving the entire time: from our initial planning, to the fifty or so conversations I had with organizational leaders, to the Co-Learning Community itself, which ended up being comprised of seven organizations in fields from higher education to the arts to agriculture to advocacy to immigration.

**AT:** What was one of the most surprising findings of the RC for you?

**BYD:** Space is the most necessary precursor to cultural transformation. I always thought that transforming your organization would mean working harder, working faster, but it turned out that the opposite was in fact true. Busyness creates cultural stasis — because when you’re busy, you never have time for the deep, complex, ongoing conversations that are essential for organizational transformation, but that don’t have a direct correlation with one’s to-do list. It is only when we slow down that we can gain enough space to do the type of deep work that transformation requires.

**AT:** Has the research you’ve done with the RC changed your understanding of the mission and vision of The BTS Center in any way?

**BYD:** It made me realize that our concerns are not just the particular concerns of a niche religiously-based organization but are the longings and hopes of a whole silent community of people who, whether they would claim any religious affiliation or not, are deeply committed to a

spiritual transformation of how we understand the world and our work in a climate-changed world. I had no idea that our fellow travelers were literally everywhere: in every community, in every walk of life, from every sector, and from many religious understandings. So many of us have had the intuition that this moment is not just about technology and policy, but is also about something far, far deeper, that goes down to the depths of Western human psyche. It was amazing to see how that intuition was shared by a far wider range of people than I had hoped possible.

**AT:** What do you feel is the role of this kind of research in a climate-changed world?

**BYD:** Our research is all about practitioners, rather than for the academy or for other research professionals. I've grown increasingly convinced that people doing the day-to-day work are the ones who have perhaps the most grounded picture of what's going on. Their research deserves to be named, shared, and celebrated.

This, of course, is not what happens most of the time. Professionals work in silence, their intuitions about the spiritual nature of this crisis going unvoiced because they're afraid of blowback from supervisors, colleagues, friends, or family. People feel at a gut level that the relentless pace at which we work, the expectations of unending growth, and the ways that very real people are turned into inanimate numbers all miss something crucial about them and about what they do.

What we try to do is listen deeply to the voices of these people, to name the patterns that we see emerging, and then to create frameworks upon which new perceptions, postures, and practices can emerge, like vines upon a trellis. In this way, what we do can offer solidarity for the people from all walks of life who need to hear someone voicing what they cannot and then offer a framework that offers new perceptions and new ways for them to value what they already know is true.

**AT:** Now that the RC has concluded, what do you envision for research at The BTS Center going forward?

**BYD:** I hope that we can embody a posture of rigorous and reverent curiosity toward everything that we do. Every program and interaction can be a site of learning for us, through many different media, and we're experimenting with developing a research plan that allows us to integrate research as a posture of all our work, rather than simply a siloed program.

Here's one particular curiosity: I'm particularly curious about how congregations and their pastors articulate how they understand what their vocation is in relationship to a climate-changed world. I've noted how many well-intentioned Christians do not believe that their faith, as lived out in the community, has anything unique to offer our climate-changed world. If they do believe that their faith has something to offer, it falls within the frame of "Another Good Thing for Good Christians to Do," which is primarily expressed in forming a Green Team, recycling, switching to LED lightbulbs, installing solar panels, or writing an occasional letter to Congress. What is the specific shape of this disconnect? Even more pressingly, what does it look like to cultivate a sense of vocation that leads churches (especially small churches) and their leaders into a more vigorous, holistic, and transformational understanding of their identity and mission in a climate-changed world?

## SAVE THE DATE

### Convocation 2023

Kinship: Re-Weaving the Great Web of Belonging

Thursday & Friday, September 28 & 29, 2023

In person at Maple Hill Inn and Conference Center  
Hallowell, Maine

A hybrid option, with a hosted live-stream of some of the Convocation sessions, will be available — *details to be announced in June.*

Keynote Speaker: **Victoria Loorz**, author, eco-spiritual director, and co-founder of the Wild Church Network

For more information and to register your interest, visit [Convocation2023.org](https://Convocation2023.org)  
*Registration goes live on June 1!*



### Small Experiments with Radical Intent

Over the course of the Research Collaborative Co-Learning Community, participant organizations took up the task of engaging in "small experiments with radical intent."\* Participants were invited to undertake a small practice that would authentically embody organizational ecological imagination, engage others within their organizations, and be small enough that it could be planned, implemented, and reported on in three months.

*\*This phrase comes from EmcArtsInc., a New York non-profit focused on research and innovation in the arts. Richard Evans, "Small Experiments with Radical Intent: Adapting to a Changing Arts Sector."*



We invite you, either as an individual or as an organization, to engage in your own small experiments with radical intent and to share your experiments and your discoveries by using the QR code. We look forward to seeing where your ecological imaginations take you!

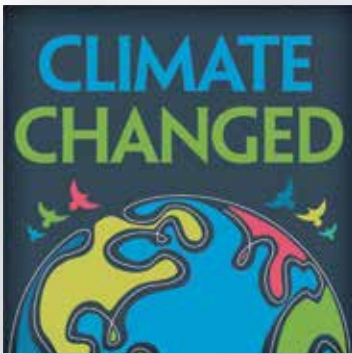


*Some of the participants in the Research Collaborative retreat held in April 2022*



# THE **BTS** CENTER

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



Co-hosted by Nicole Diroff and Ben Yosua-Davis, with producer Peterson Toscano, Season 2 of Climate Changed focuses on collective honesty and collective 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 in June!

Listen and subscribe at [climatechanged.podbean.com](http://climatechanged.podbean.com)

## Please join us for one of our upcoming programs:

### Lament with Earth

- Five seasonal gatherings for the community in our eco-grief
- Next gathering: Thursday, June 22, 2023
- 7:30 - 8:30pm Eastern (online)

### Wonder and Wander Series

- In person at Tir na nOg Farm in Pownal, Maine
- Saturday, August 5 and Friday, October 27, 2023

### Spiritual Ecology for Spiritual Leaders Gathering

- A 4-day gathering for early-career leaders, in person in Portland, Maine
- Sunday, August 27 - Wednesday, August 30, 2023
- Apply online at [thebtscenter.org](http://thebtscenter.org) by May 25, 2023

## Our Mission

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

Cover Illustration by David Bruggink, 2022