



Roots and wings: The gifts of belonging

**Thandiwe
Dale-Ferguson**

Alumna, writer, pastor;
Spiritual Care Counselor
Accent Care Hospice
Loveland, Colorado

Convocation address
Matthew 6:25-34
June 5, 2026

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We are well acquainted with worry, but we belong to something larger than our fears.

More of my worry than I'd like to admit is about the very things Jesus addresses in our pericope from the Sermon on the Mount: food and clothing.

As a single mother of two very independent young children, worry and I are well acquainted. Is the fridge adequately stocked? What if there is an impromptu playdate and dinner guest? Clothing?—I struggle to keep up with growing children and an equally every-growing laundry pile.

And then, of course, there's life to worry about. Safety, chores, rent, car maintenance, childcare costs, college savings.

Yes, worry and I know each other well. Worry seems a natural response to ever-changing circumstances. To the many things I cannot control. To uncertainty.

Whether you face the mundane unknowns of living life or the particular and profound uncertainties that a transition such as graduation brings, the reality is that uncertainty marks our lives.

Faith leader Cameron Trimble writes, "Modern society tells us that uncertainty is something we should fix. If we just work hard, save, invest wisely, and make good choices, we'll finally be safe....

"But life doesn't work that way. Markets go up and down. Governments change. Industries vanish.... Storms happen." Institutions that were once the cornerstone of communities slowly disappear. We age. Relationships shift and end. History disrupts our plans.

In today's socio-political reality, what once felt like vague apprehensions have coalesced into certain and predictable uncertainty, decay, even collapse. What, we may wonder, will the world look like in five years? Ten? Fifty? What will our country look like? The church? Our own lives? Those of our children, the next generation to whom we are collectively responsible?

Trimble points us to the wisdom of the mystics, the prophets, and Jesus. "They didn't find a way to avoid uncertainty. Instead, they found something deeper to rely on," she writes.

When Jesus says do not worry about your life, he reminds his listeners that life is

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1156 East 57th St.
Chicago, Illinois 60637

773.643.4411
ddh.uchicago.edu

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Overflowing with life

Remembrance, gratitude, and promise center around the June Convocation.

Every issue of the *DDH Bulletin* gives a glimpse of life at the Disciples Divinity House and how it overflows beyond this physical place through many connections, persons, and ideas. News of alums, friends, and current students fill this edition—one cannot turn the pages without literally touching it.

We announce the full funding of the Amy A. Northcutt Scholarship, its first recipient, and plans to mark this milestone. We remember Dolores Highbaugh and her transformative presence. We pay tribute to Larry Bouchard’s thirty years as a trustee and give thanks for his continuing leadership. We celebrate a new fund that honors the life partnership of Laird and Evelyn Thomason.

We also reach back to early Disciples history. The touchpoint of pieces by Claudia Highbaugh and Joel Brown is the 1801 revival at Cane Ridge, Kentucky; they each reflect on legacies that stretch to our time. And, we reach forward to welcome this fall’s entering class of Disciples Scholars.

In this issue, these connections and history are centered in DDH’s June Convocation, the close of the academic year and the sending forth of the graduates. In her Convocation address,

speaker Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson affirms that we belong to something larger than our fears. She reminds the graduates of the gifts of “roots” and “wings” that can come from a profound experience of belonging.

A year ago, Convocation festivities were held on Friday; by Sunday, students had packed the rest of their books and belongings to empty the second and third floors of “the House.” Contractors arrived on Monday. Demolition began days later. The old dropped ceilings and wobbly ceiling fans came down; new bathrooms, new flooring, fresh paint colors, refinished woodwork, and better lighting were added. The most anticipated part of the renovation was air-conditioning—energy-efficient cooling that is now necessary for increasingly hot and humid Chicago summers.

This summer, many students are able to stay at DDH for learning experiences—chaplaincy training, language study, congregational ministry, and internships. What a difference a year has made!

Yet, as transformative as the renovation is proving to be, its purpose was never only about the building itself. A renewed House supports the deeper renewal that happens here in the questions, conversations, learning, and dreaming that are fostered in this place—and that overflow in this *Bulletin*.

With gratitude, Kristine A. Culp, *Dean*



THE 131ST ACADEMIC
YEAR CONCLUDES

LEFT MDiv graduates Lilia Ellis, Delaney Beh, and Delaney Wallace.

Rachel Abdoler received the J. Coert Rylaarsdam Prize from the Divinity School in recognition of her efforts to promote interfaith relations with particular reference to the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. An MDiv alumna and Disciples Scholar, she defended her dissertation on May 28 and was awarded “distinction.” Titled, *Between Defense and Devotion: Butrus al-Sadamantī’s Kitāb al-Tashih in Its 13th Century Copto-Islamic Milieu*, it seeks to deepen the understanding of the thirteenth-century “Golden Age” in Copto-Arabic literature. The dissertation includes the first critical edition of al-Sadamantī’s Arabic text based on extant manuscripts from the



Rachel Abdoler receives the Rylaarsdam Prize.

Vatican Library, Syria, and Egypt. Her research was supported by a Fulbright-Hayes Dissertation Research Abroad Award this past year.

At the close of the service, Delaney Wallace and Emma Yeager led a litany to bless “the space among us.” It affirmed: “We each contributed to the blessing that is this House; every resident playing an integral part in the community we’ve built. As we go forth today and our distance to it grows, grant that its blessing in our lives may grow as well.” Amen. ✚

LEFT AM graduates Sai Srinivas, Emma Yeager, Wendy Hao Wang, and Ethan Yu.

Venturing forth with courage and hope

Convocation celebrates ten graduates, their achievements, and what they have learned together along the way.

On Friday evening, June 5, Disciples Divinity House marked the close of its 131st academic year with a Convocation Service in the Chapel of the Holy Grail.

The graduates helped to plan and lead the service. It offered prayers and readings, including a poem from Rumi recited in English and Persian, and a folk rock duet of the Crosby, Stills, Nash song, “Wasted on the Way,” sounding the theme of retrospection and moving forward.

Convocation Speaker **Thandiwe Dale-Ferguson** took her text from the Sermon on the Mount, and drew on stories from her childhood in South Africa to explore how the sense of belonging to a wide world can “give courage to stand alone for the world.”

Graduating were four Disciples Scholars and six ecumenical residents; each has been part of DDH for most of their master’s or doctoral studies. DDH Scholar **Delaney Beh** (MDiv) was honored by the Divinity School with the Joseph Gray Rhind Award for excellence in academic and professional training and notable promise in ministry. Delaney’s MDiv thesis considered, *The Courage to Be Church: Renewing Liberal Protestant Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty*. They will serve at First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn this summer. **Lilia Ellis** (MDiv) will enter the Divinity School’s PhD program in Theology this fall.

Delaney Wallace (MDiv/MSW) will intern at the historic Hull House in Chicago this summer.

Five graduates received the Master of Arts (AM) degree. DDH Scholar **Emma Yeager** will be working freelance, doing historical research for nonprofits. **Wendy Hao Wang** will return to Hong Kong for a consulting job; **Sai Srinivas** will pursue advanced language study; **Ethan Yu** will be in Southern California; **Noah Sveiven** will begin a PhD program in the History of Science at Princeton University.

Disciples Scholar **Luke Soderstrom** successfully defended his PhD dissertation on June 16. Titled, *Moravian Changelings: Children, Feeling, and Religious Certainty in the Protestant Atlantic*, it examines “the figure of the child” in relation to Moravian piety.



Landon Wilcox (2019) and Briyana Chisholm welcomed Landon Jr. on April 18. Landon (Sr.) is now Building and Capital Services Advisor with Disciples Church Extension Fund, and concluded his pastorate of Bethany Christian Church in Fort Washington, Maryland, on June 30.



Congratulations to **Colton Lott** (2015; trustee) and Kelsey Cobbs on the joyful arrival of baby Caroline on June 7. She will be dedicated on July 26, the same day that her proud dad will be installed as Senior Minister of First Christian Church of Norman, Oklahoma.

Current Scholar **Brandon Roberts** is serving as DDH's librarian.



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Legacy and promise

Remarkable generosity lifts the Amy Ann Northcutt Scholarship to full endowment; Lauren Blakemore is named as the first recipient.

Nine years ago, friends and family of Amy Northcutt initiated a scholarship as a way to honor her memory and sustain Amy's love of people and ideas, of thinking creatively and critically to solve problems and build connections, and her sense of God's grace in the world and our responsibility for each other.

Amy was the Chief Information Officer of the National Science Foundation at the time of her death in May 2017. An attorney by training and a leader in government and non-profit organizations, she was an alumna of DDH, a former president of its Board of Trustees, and a person of deep faith.

Craig Middlebrook, Amy's husband, envisioned a scholarship for emerging women leaders of promise who study religion or



theology. The effort has been propelled by his conviction and commitment. Since the fund's creation, 217 different donors, families, or entities have contributed 398 separate gifts. A surge of generosity at the end of last year—twenty-five gifts totaling over \$20,000—lifted the fund past the initial goal to \$257,344. He commented, "This remarkable response is a loving testament that Amy continues to live in our hearts and that her legacy will live on to support others for years to come."

At its April 25 meeting, the Board of Trustees took formal action to create the Amy Ann Northcutt Scholarship. It will undergird the

education of "emerging women leaders of promise who, regardless of their religious or denominational affiliation, study religion and/or theology at the University of Chicago and are affiliated with the Disciples Divinity House."

Amy always felt a responsibility to support and mentor younger women, whether their careers were in the academy, public service, or the private sector. In effect, the scholarship extends her mentorship.

Lauren Kate Blakemore, an entering Disciples Divinity House Scholar and AM student in the Divinity School, has been named the first recipient for this fall. (See the article about entering Scholars.) "She is a truly

gifted individual who combines tremendous intellect and exceptional character," says one of her Kenyon College professors.

Lauren comments, "This provides an incredible chance for a lower-income student without connections to academia, like myself, to pursue meaningful research in a field that I am deeply passionate about... I realize and respect the degree to which such a generous opportunity can impact a young scholar's life." ❖



Save the Date! Sunday, September 27

Join us for an afternoon of poetry, art, and conversation at the Disciples Divinity House. It will begin with a light lunch and end with a DDH "sherry hour." Come celebrate Amy's legacy, the connections that have built this scholarship, and the promise that generations of Amy Northcutt Scholars will bring to the world.



Dale-Ferguson CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

fleeting. Nothing lasts forever. Change happens. Uncertainty is guaranteed. He invites his listeners to find something deeper to rely on.

Thankfully, we need not venture far for evidence of the something deeper to rely on; we need not look far to see that we belong to something larger than our fears.

Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field.

Pause. Breathe. Attend to the attestation of creation. If God so feeds the birds, if God so clothes the lilies, have faith, for like these winged and rooted siblings, you too belong.

The question of belonging has long been a salient one for me. My earliest memories encompass the rolling hills of kwaZulu Natal, the smell of the cookfire in my best friend Thembi's kitchen, the sound of Zulu, like a spoken song.

The place was my home, yet I was an obvious outsider: a wealthy, white, Western child living illegally in rural South Africa at the height of apartheid.



Thandiwe with Alexis Vaughan and Allie Lundblad.

When I was six, my family moved to small-town New Hampshire where, suddenly, I looked the part of an insider. I learned to bury the many pieces that betrayed my unbelonging: my name, my fluency in Zulu, the pieces of my culture that I didn't get from my parents. I got good at fitting in.

"Fitting in," explains social scientist Brené Brown, "is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be in order to be accepted. *Belonging*, on the other hand, does not require us to change who we are; it requires us to *be* who we are."

Look at the birds of the air. Consider the lilies of the field. They do not seek to be any more or any less than exactly what they are. They live their belonging.

One of the gifts of this place, the Disciples Divinity House, is the invitation to cultivate and experience belonging: to explore, to discover, to *be* exactly who we are.

My first memory of the House is from thirty-two years ago at its centennial celebration. I remember a giant bowl of strawberries and singing *Siyahamba* at the chapel service. It was a song I'd sung countless times in South Africa, and the words still tasted like home. In that moment, as I sang a familiar tune in my other mother tongue, I felt not only belonging in this place but an assurance of my belonging in and with and to the divine.

Graduates, of all the things you've learned and of all the gifts you take with you from this place, the gifts of belonging are perhaps the most important. You belong to this community, to one another—a learning you've cultivated as you've shared bathrooms, cooked and cleaned in the kitchen,

worked and studied, worshiped and played, celebrated and grieved, navigated conflict and reconciliation, breach and repair.

Because the truth is, learning to belong in a community such as this one teaches us the deeper truths: that we all belong to each other, that we belong to creation and Creator. This mutual belonging that blesses the space among us has the power to transform us, our communities and, indeed, our world.

Brené Brown writes, "As it turns out, those who have the deepest sense of true belonging are people who also have the courage to stand alone when called to do that. They are willing to maintain their integrity and risk disconnection in order to stand up for what they believe in."

Belonging roots us in who we are, in where we come from, in the people and communities that have shaped and formed us, in connection to creation and Creator. And, belonging gives us wings—the courage to pursue righteousness, to practice right relationship, to sow justice, and to cultivate God's beloved community. May it be so. Amen. ❖

Vy Nguyen (2004; trustee) was in Bossey, Switzerland, in April to meet with other leaders of the ACT Alliance, the World Council of Churches, and the Lutheran World Federation for a high-level consultation on ecumenical work in relief and international development.



Stephanie McLemore (1992) is now Vice President for Advancement at Lexington Theological Seminary.



Lee Hull Moses (2001) was installed as Senior Minister of Central Christian Church in Indianapolis in May. She was this year's baccalaureate speaker at Bethany College.





Sarah Zuniga (2018) has been named Mission Director of the Disciples Peace Fellowship.

Kris Culp (1982; dean) spoke on *Three Forms of Freedom* for Founder's Day at Bethany College on March 5.

Sarath Pillai (former resident) is now Assistant Professor in the History Department at the University of Calgary, Alberta.



Joan Bell-Haynes (1995; trustee) has joined the leadership team for The Proclamation Project.

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Board of Trustees news

The presidential gavel is passed from Jones to Duncan; welcome to Raquel Collazo.

Pamela James Jones called the Board of Trustees meeting to order on April 25 before presenting the gavel to new President, **Patricia (Tish) Duncan**. Expressions of gratitude for Jones's leadership followed, as well as for that of outgoing Vice President, Gaylord Yu, and incoming Vice President, Alexis Vaughan.

Pam Jones served as President from 2022–25 and as Vice President from 2015–21. She contributed to the theological education fellow initiative, increased scholarship support, and renovation plans. A graduate of Spelman College and Temple University Law, she came to DDH as an ecumenical resident and earned her MDiv and PhD (History of Christianity) at the Divinity School. She is an ordained American Baptist minister and taught at Central Michigan University for nine years. She joined the Board in 2012.

Tish Duncan, an MDiv and PhD alumna, is Associate Professor of Religion at Texas Christian University. She is a widely admired teacher, ordained Disciples minister, and the author of *Novel Hermeneutics in the Greek Pseudo-Clementine Romance*. As she discussed at a recent Monday forum, she has been exploring new pedagogical approaches as a fellow of Yale's "Life Worth Living" initiative. She joined the Board in 2020 and previously



chaired its Scholarship Committee.

DDH is grateful for their dedication, imagination, and generosity. Their remarkable commitment will continue to guide the Board as it meets new possibilities and challenges.

Raquel Collazo began her first term as a trustee in January 2026. A fourth-generation Disciple, she is the Assistant Vice President for Client Relations at the Pension Fund of the Christian Church. She brings fifteen years of experience in the financial industry and a passion for working with those in historically underserved communities by identifying needs and guiding to solutions. Previously, Raquel was a Private Client Banker and Small Business Specialist at JPMorgan Chase Bank. She is a graduate of Marian University in Indianapolis.



Raquel lives in Indianapolis with her husband and three children. She is a member of Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo) Casa del Alfarero and serves as its Director of Children's Ministries. She is a member of the Indiana Region's Commission on Ministry. ✚

Entering Scholars announced for 2026–27

Five new fellowship recipients will join returning Scholars this fall.

Lauren Blakemore (AM) is the inaugural *Amy Ann Northcutt Scholar*. She is a summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Kenyon College (2026), where she majored in History and Arabic. She plans to continue language study while exploring "the theme of identity within religion and how language, culture, history, and society can influence its manifestations." Her home congregation is Sturgeon Christian Church, near Columbia, Missouri.

YeChan Park (MDiv) is the *Dr. Geunhee and Mrs. Geunsoon Yu Scholar*. He brings a business degree from Purdue University-Northwest, master's coursework at Trinity Evangelical Seminary, and five years in campus ministry with InterVarsity, where he developed the innovative Global Bridge Project. He immigrated from Korea as a young adult and came to know the Disciples through Bethel Christian Church in Indianapolis.



Amelia Richter (MDiv) is the *Oreon E. Scott Entering Scholar*. She is a 2021 cum laude graduate of Kansas State University (BS, Biology). An abiding concern about harm and

The power to see possibilities

Larry Bouchard is honored for thirty years of service and named Adviser to the Scholarship Committee

Larry D. Bouchard, an alumnus who is now a professor emeritus of religion at the University of Virginia, was elected to the Board of Trustees in 1995 and began his service in January 1996. Two years later, he was named chair of the Scholarship Committee. He served as President of the Board for five years beginning in January 2005. Those titles do not begin to describe his role. His hallmark throughout, according to trustee Cynthia Lindner, has been as "a critical scholar with an eye to possibility."

At its April meeting, the Board recognized Larry for his generative role in its deliberations over thirty years. He has concluded his term on the Board and begun a new role as Adviser to the Scholarship Committee. During a study session at this meeting, his portrait of "Disciple-ish" traits suggested ways to recognize potential Disciples Scholars; a rich discussion ensued.

Cynthia Lindner spoke on behalf of fellow trustees to celebrate Larry's continuing leadership. She observed, "I've never known Disciples Divinity House without Larry Bouchard." He was already a DDH Scholar and PhD student when she arrived as a



ministry student. "He was a source of information, inspiration, and demystification for most questions, and especially when encountering 'ontology' and 'hermeneutics' for the first time."

On this Board, "Larry has been a source of reason, experience, theological innovation, and imagination—offering mind- and heart-expanding turns of phrase. When the Board was seeking a theme for DDH's 125th anniversary, he offered, *Grateful for what is to come*."

It was not only an evocative phrase. The theme imagined a way forward into a future that is necessarily uncertain and unknown: to meet it with gratitude even as its possibilities and grace come toward us. He called it "the House with the future as Thou."

Cynthia concluded, "Adviser is an appropriate title and description for Larry's presence among us—whether that is in person, or virtual, or in a written thought piece. *Ad visio*—add vision." Larry has exemplified and called forth the power to see. We could not have known Disciples Divinity House these past decades without Larry Bouchard. ✚

Disciples in shared spirit and through Nathan Digby, an ordained Disciple minister and Paulo's former dean.

Allie Lundblad (PhD) is the *Bernard and Annie Mae Cooke Scholar*. An MDiv alumna, she is currently a third-year student in the Pastoral Theology, Personality, and Culture PhD program at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. She is concluding a decade of service as minister of the Christian Church of Arlington Heights. DDH's award, in combination with tuition from Garrett, will allow her to be immersed in her studies full-time. ✚



Allison Nash (current Scholar) launched "All My Neighbors Book Club" with the help of a NBA Young Adult Leadership Grant.



As part of their annual retreat, **Jeff Lehn**, **Ben Varum** (former residents), **Beau Underwood** (2006), and **Michael Swartzentruber** (2007) stopped by DDH to meet with **Kris Culp** and tour the renovation. They also took in a White Sox game.



Brent Reynolds (1997) contributed to *Beyond Words*, an exploration of mysticism, faith, and psychedelic experience.





Santiago Piñón's (1998) forthcoming book, *When God is Silent*, reimagines “the dark night of the soul” not as a spiritual failure, but as a hard school of love and a summons to meet grief with dignity, truth-telling, and sustained care.

Laird Thomason (1962) included DDH on his road trip from DC to Iowa in May. His visit coincided with graduate Delaney Beh's Senior Ministry Presentation.



Robert Wilson-Black (1991) is the new Director of Religion at the Chautauqua Institute.

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Cane Ridge, the *Last Will*, and the future of theological education

Cane Ridge is not just a backdrop for our tradition's origin story. It can let us see how the forms of church and ministry we take for granted are born, age, and—sometimes mercifully—die.

Joel Brown, *President*
Disciples of Christ Historical Society
Given at the Board of Trustees retreat
Cane Ridge, Kentucky, September 2025

Cane Ridge as a signpost. In August 1801, the sacramental meeting hosted by the Presbyterian church at Cane Ridge and its pastor, Barton W. Stone, drew crowds in staggering numbers. Estimates range from ten to twenty thousand people over the week. Wagons covered an area the size of several city blocks.

The pattern of the meeting followed the Scots-Presbyterian communion. Yet almost immediately, the form overflowed its banks. On Saturday, preaching became continuous. Before dark, the grounds echoed with penitent cries and shouts. People began “falling,” then they stood “shouting deliverance.”

Sunday brought a soaking rain and—no less—ordered sacrament. Long tables ran through the aisles; communicants entered in successive table-sittings as ministers rotated in administering the Supper. And yet, the meeting spilled out in unprogrammed ways.

Cane Ridge was not only large; it was ecumenical, interracial, improvisational. The event cracked the shell of settled Presbyterian order on the frontier. It revealed a religious energy that no single confession could domesticate. And it announced that Christian authority

might be discerned in the cries and testimonies of the people, not only in the canons of a synod.



Barton Stone as its interpreter. Before the Campbells' rational, primitivist program came to fruition, Stone led what was arguably the most significant Christian movement yet to arise west of the Appalachians. At the center of his thought stood the freedom of conscience from creedal coercion and the power of the gospel to renew life and give the assurance of faith.

Stone sought the restoration of primitive Christian *life*—holiness, neighbor love, separation from the world's “Godrobbing practices”—as the condition of any authentic restoration of primitive forms. Not even believer's baptism was enforced as a boundary. Unity was to be unity in freedom rather than conformity to a reconstructed blueprint. Stone had stumbled over election and reprobation. How could the God who is love refuse faith to some and grant it to others? He concluded that God gives faith through the gospel itself: the Spirit awakens desire through Jesus' testimony; sinners have the power to believe that good news.

Two more notes sharpen Stone's distinctiveness. First, liberty. Early Stoneites spoke

with near-revolutionary zeal about freedom from clerical aristocracy.

Second, eschatology. Stoneites lived within a millennial horizon. They believed that only a restored, non-sectarian Christianity could credibly hasten the dawning kingdom. Hence unity was not an add-on; it carried soteriological and eschatological freight.

Stone is often overshadowed by Campbell in the historiography, but, in many ways, the theology and spirituality of Disciples today has more affinity with Stone than Campbell.

The Last Will and Testament. On June 28, 1804, at Cane Ridge, the year-old dissident Springfield Presbytery made and signed a “last will and testament.” The document is radical, if slightly satirical. It opens by riffing on Hebrews 12 about death and seed, shaking and what remains. Then the decisive line: *We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit.*

The items that follow enact a program of ecclesial divestment and democratization. Candidates for ministry should “study the Holy Scriptures with fervent prayer,” receive “license from God,” and preach “the simple Gospel...without any mixture of philosophy, vain deceit, traditions of men, or the rudiments of the world.” Each congregation should choose its preacher, be supported by free-will offering, admit members, remove offenses, and never delegate government “to any man or set of men.”

The appended “Witnesses' Address” gives the rationale: party spirit and human creeds fracture the church. A further resolution at the same meeting was to take “no other name than Christians.” The point was not originality but participation in a wider movement: to unname the parties for the sake of the one Body, so the world might be readied for redemption.

Shifting social imaginaries. So far, I have emphasized event, leader, and text: Cane Ridge, Stone, *The Last Will and Testament*. Now I want to set them within a larger shift in the American social imaginary. That framework helps us connect their upheaval to ours. I am drawing largely from Ted Smith's book, *The End of Theological Education*.

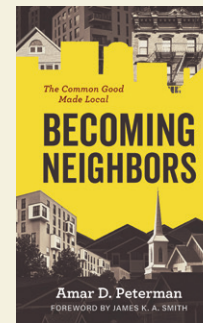
In the colonial and early national period, many European settlers imagined church and state in tight circuits of mutual legitimation: established traditions, parish-like congregations as quasi-public institutions, ministers as public officers, theological education largely embedded in general education at colleges. The “*standing order*” is the world in which Stone and his colleagues came of age in the young Republic. By 1818, with disestablishment, that world unraveled. To many, it looked like the end of religion in public.

But something new emerged, *the voluntary association*. Bible and tract societies, missionary agencies, schools, seminaries, and, crucially, denominations and congregations rose to become the mother-technology of American religion. This is the water in which the Stone-Campbell movement was dropped and learned to swim. Our movement was born in that transition, and our institutions matured in the associative ecology it created. *The Last Will* is, in this sense, both a death notice and a birth announcement: the end of presbyterial hierarchy; the rise of a freer, association-shaped church that trusted Scripture, congregational agency, and the Spirit's call.

We are living through another unraveling just as consequential as disestablishment. If Cane Ridge belonged to a world in which the old standing orders were unraveling and our movement grew up in a world sustained by voluntary associations, then we now find ourselves in the midst of another profound shift, *the rise of individualization*.

Institutions—family networks, civic organizations, congregations, denominations—no longer carry the same binding force they once did. Where earlier generations inherited their place in a church or community, today each of us is expected to construct our own biography, to choose and re-choose every commitment. (Which is hard work, by the way!)

We can see this unraveling almost everywhere. Congregations that once anchored towns or neighborhoods are thinning out. Denominational loyalty, once assumed,



Amar Peterman, ecumenical resident, published *Becoming Neighbors: The Common Good Made Local* (Eerdmans).

Barbara and **Marshall Dunn** (1965) have been busy with a trip to Costa Rica and support for neighbors at home.



Danielle Cox (2012), Senior Minister of Avon [Indiana] Christian Church, reports that construction has begun on the congregation's innovative collaboration with Habitat for Humanity to build a housing development on its campus.



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Virginia White (2014) gave a graduate seminar for Princeton University's Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies on "Comedy, Judith Butler, and Queer Feminist Ethics." Earlier this spring, she led an experience of "dinner church" at the Oklahoma Regional Assembly.



Andrew Packman (2009) has been promoted to Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, a tenure-track position, and Director for Formation at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

Current Scholar **Tristan Spangler-Dunning** helped to lead the Disciples Young Adult Book Club, an initiative of The Church Narrative Project.

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has become optional. Many select a congregation, or leave one, much as they might select a brand: depending on how it fits with their sense of self in the moment.

At the same time, religious energy has not simply vanished. People still seek transcendence, meaning, community. They pray, they form groups, they take on practices of mindfulness or justice-seeking, they participate in rituals—but often outside of traditional congregations or across many different communities. A yoga studio, a book club, or a social movement may carry the spiritual weight once borne by the local church. Even within congregations, belonging is thinner: people attend less often, resist formal membership, and define their

Cane Ridge was not only large; it was ecumenical, interracial, improvisational.

identity more as personal spirituality than as covenant with a body.

For denominations, this might feel like collapse. Membership rolls decline, budgets tighten, schools close. But the deeper truth is that the social form itself—the voluntary association—has lost its privileged role as the default way to organize communal life. Just as earlier generations mistook the standing order for the entirety of religion, we often mistake the age of voluntary associations for the permanent form of church.

This is where we are today. We must begin to imagine ministry and theological education in a world where the individual is the primary unit of belonging, and where new, fragile forms of community are just beginning to take shape.

Two implications follow for Disciples. First, our sharper-than-average decline among mainline peers may be intelligible in light of our deep investment in the voluntary association ecology. We were exceptionally good at it—campus houses, general ministries, a robust denominational middle. As that middle thins, the loss feels disproportionate.

Second, our model of theological education has been tuned for two centuries to that ecology: the seminary as hub forming professionals for a network of associations. But that model is dying—not because we did it poorly, but because it did its work within a world that is passing. Like the *Last Will*, the end could be generative if we can imagine forms that fit a world of individualized, networked practices without surrendering theological education and Christian community to consumer choice.

Christians have always confessed that the end is at hand, that the reign of God has drawn near. By that light we can see the passing of every order of this age. Those endings matter and real goods are at stake, but they are never ultimate. The end of what we mistake for the whole world is not the end of God's world.

At Cane Ridge, a presbytery died to be born into the Body of Christ at large. We may be asked to let old models die so that new patterns—more porous, less credential-centric, more attuned to place, justice, and shared practices—can be born.

Now, I do not pretend to have the blueprint. My point is diagnostic: our moment shares Cane Ridge's sense of upheaval, of newness, of endings and new possibilities, and *The Last Will and Testament* gives us a grammar for faithful dying.

We remember Cane Ridge as birth: the roar of many voices, the table crowded, the Spirit moving. Yet Cane Ridge is not only a site of revival; it stands in a landscape worked by enslaved people, some of whom may have stood here, prayed here, or were excluded here. The social imaginaries of standing orders, voluntary associations, and individualization do not float above that history. They are entangled with race, with settler colonialism, with who is authorized to speak, to exhort, to preside, to be educated, to be remembered.

The leaders of our movement for the most part could make one great leap, beyond establishment to voluntary associations, but not the second—into a truly abolitionist, multiracial ecclesial life. That should be a lesson in this moment, as we contemplate the leap we must take. ✚



Searching for ancestors at Cane Ridge

Claudia Highbaugh considers family and denominational history, memory, and the work that we are called to do.

Claudia A. Highbaugh, *Trustee*
Monday Forum, October 13, 2025

Cane Ridge, Kentucky, was the site of a weeklong revival in 1801 to which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), along with the independent Christian Churches and the Church of Christ, traces its roots. Currently, the old chapel at the revival site is conserved in a building that covers it. It holds the historic place and commemorates that gathering. The chapel itself has gone through many changes.

The Cane Ridge church was the first physical space that allowed the enslaved to worship with white congregants. The paternal side of my family, both my father's father's side, the Highbaugh-Beeler families, and my father's mother's side, the Brown-Stith families, were enslaved at farms in Kentucky. I have wondered whether my ancestors were at some point at Cane Ridge or the Cane Ridge revival.



In September, the Board of Trustees traveled to Kentucky for a retreat. We met to think about our work together and consider our responsibilities for the House in the coming years. We began at the site of the Cane Ridge revival and then met at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, where a historic Shaker village now offers accommodation for present-day visitors.

At the end of our meetings and blessed with a beautiful communion service and the singing of a familiar Shaker hymn, I traveled with two of my closest friends to search for my enslaved Kentucky family, hoping to locate at least one of the farms/plantations where they had lived.

My friends Wanda, Belva, and I spent several days exploring museums and family research centers in Hart and Harden counties. We were able to track the paternal side of the family; with the surname Highbaugh, it is easy to look for both ancestors and descendants with our distinctive name. The maternal side of my father's family is Brown,

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ABOVE Great-grandpa Burton Highbaugh, far right with hand on hip, as a young man in Kentucky, 1890s? Others unknown.

LEFT The enclosed, conserved historic chapel at Cane Ridge.

Thanks to the leadership of **Cynthia Lindner** (1978; trustee), Director of Ministry Studies at the Divinity School, the school now offers a certificate in chaplaincy for MDiv students. It builds on the school's "longstanding strength at the intersection of serious scholarship and lived practice."

David Hall (1989) presented "Hermeneutics in the Post-Truth Era: The Perils of Making Sense in an Environment of Unmitigated Bullshitting," for a Divinity School conference honoring now Emeritus Professor William Schweiker.

The Week of Compassion's Disciples Seminars Summer Immersion in International Disaster Response has sent current Scholar **Fiyori Kidane** and entering Scholar **Amelia Richter** to Pakistan and the Philippines, respectively. They are learning first-hand "how faith communities accompany one another in moments of vulnerability and rebuilding."



Highbaugh CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

not at all easy without specific locations and birth information that is simply not available for the enslaved.

For a couple of days, we looked at files that included census information, old clippings, and assorted newspapers and flyers. It was my goal to find at least one of the farms and dig up a piece of earth as a token of my family history. But it was difficult to find the actual land from which my freed ancestors migrated following the emancipation. It was never going to be possible to know if my enslaved ancestors were at the Cane Ridge event. I felt that my labors were in vain and the trip a failed search.

So much stimulation, so much history and reflection, such an immersion into holy ground in one short week, with no real satisfaction at the end of my family journey. And yet, I felt and feel connected to the stories that I experienced and learned in that week, bringing my spirit to a very surprising and spiritual conclusion.

Among my parent’s collection of memorabilia, I found lots of photos with few explanations, but a bit of additional information makes the story a bit more promising.

My dad’s paternal grandfather was Burton Highbaugh. He moved in the late 1800s from Kentucky to Indianapolis and then to Los Angeles. My father met his grandfather one time. He was not a part of his family when my father was growing up.

Grandpa Highbaugh had four children, Scipio, Richard, Stella, and Harvey. I did not know Uncle Scip. He followed his father to L.A. in the early 1900s. Richard was my grandfather. He died in 1933. I knew Uncle Harvey as a child and had a relationship with Aunt Stella in my years living in Southern California.

My dad, Richard Brown Highbaugh, and my uncle, Earl Burton Highbaugh, were both a part of the famous Tuskegee Airmen in the 1940s. My uncle died in World War II. I never knew him.

My dad’s great-grandmother Stith, Grandpa Brown’s mother, was married to Gary Brown, a one-eighth blood Negro.



ABOVE Great-grandpa Burton Highbaugh and great-grandmother Stith.

There is a school photo of my grandmother, Margrave Brown, in Kentucky from the early 1900s.

The Brown and Highbaugh families moved to Irvington/Indianapolis in the early 1900s, as part of the Great Migration. Both sides of my father’s family, maternal and paternal, lived in Irvington in homes that they owned in that small neighborhood in Indianapolis. The six or seven households of the Brown and Highbaugh families were the only Black families in Irvington for more than fifty

It was important for me to look broadly across four generations of family to learn how history shapes and creates identity, community, and vocation.

years. My father and his brother integrated the local elementary school in the 1920s during the years when the national headquarters of the KKK was in Irvington.



ABOVE Great-grandpa Highbaugh’s children: Scipio, Richard (top, far right), Stella, and Harvey, 1920s.

For many years, the headquarters of the Christian Church was located in Irvington. My father’s first job at ten years old was to help his great uncle, who was the weekend custodian for the Missions Building, on Friday evenings and Saturday afternoons, after lock-up. The small house across the street from the sprawling headquarters was the Tea Room where the Negro staff in the Missions Building had their meals and breaks; they were not allowed to sit at a table with the white staff. My great aunt ran the Tea Room.

In the end, I realized that the search for my family roots in Kentucky was not a failure. Traveling to the mid-South to see the place of the beginnings of the church where I have grown up in a faith community, where I have been nurtured and educated in two Black Disciples congregations, I realized that my roots are deep in Disciples history, tradition, location, and vocation.

I found memory and history that confirm the direction of my education and vocation. Even without understanding or knowing all the details of my family history and place, I am firmly rooted in time and place by a faith tradition that called me into ministry. My upbringing in two Black Disciple congregations, education, and leadership training in the regional and local church allowed me to meet the challenges of ministry as the first Black woman ordained to the ministry in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

It was important for me to look broadly across four generations of family to learn how history shapes and creates identity, community, and vocation. In the end, we are connected to our pasts and invited to participate in the challenges and changes for the future.



LEFT Mother’s Day, 1951. Four generations family photo: at center, Grandma Brown, mother of Margrave (to her right with corsage), with Claudia Ann at nine months old on her lap; Claudia’s parents, Richard and Dolores (back center).

A few days ago, I sat with a dear friend of fifty years. We have both spent our vocational years doing campus ministry and chaplaincy. I asked my friend Diane how to talk about preparing for what is to come, what challenges we can expect, and how we anticipate a response to what is next.

She reminded me that we never know what is coming, what is ahead, or what to expect. In an educational context, we knew the movement of the academic year, from orientation to commencement. Pastors know the movement of the liturgical year. But the circumstances, events, emergencies, life and death responsibilities, and political and social atrocities, are never apparent and mostly unexpected.

What changes and challenges are upon us as we consider the future of religious and theological education and vocation? How do we prepare for what is next? As you might imagine, the trustees did not arrive at a simple answer about what it means to ensure the life of the Disciples Divinity House into an unknown future.

Yet, there are some lessons to share from our discussion and several resources for education and vocation:

Stay woke. Consider the parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13). Woke is not about erasing the past. It is about looking forward and being ready for what is to come.



ABOVE My Nana, Margrave Brown (front row, second from the end) in the third or fourth grade, probably in Kentucky around 1904.

LEFT Uncle Earl Burton Highbaugh (left) and Richard Brown Highbaugh, my dad.

Learn from your tasks as much as you learn from your texts. Take notes on how things work and where things work. Learn how to read a room or community or gathering. Look, listen, and watch carefully what is happening. Keep notes of things that work and things that do not work. Learn not just from mistakes but also from success.

Listen to learn. Create and use connections. Build a visible and virtual team of folks on whom you can depend as you move through education and vocational tasks. Be a resource when you are able to do so. Know who to ask and how to ask to get things done.

Take time to reflect. Stay awake. Stay awake. Stay awake!!!

In this last chapter of my life with most of my vocational responsibilities at end, I am left with the trusteeship of two educational boards: DDH and my alma mater, Hiram College. These two commitments call on the best of forty-five



ABOVE The old Missions Building with adjacent Tea Room.

years of working in higher education and fifty-four years of living and learning on a college or university campus.

It is possible to do the work we are called to do amid changes and challenges, if we commit to engaging and employing our best skills and experiences. The details of the day-to-day events and experiences and the things we learn there are the data for the work we have to do. ✚

Isabel Neal, partner of **Benny VanDerburgh** (2019), was in Chicago to give a reading from *Thrown Voice*, for which she won the 2025 Yale Younger Poets Prize.

Adam Frieberg (2006) is Director of Data Architecture and Integration, a new role in the Office of the General Minister and President.

In Memoriam: **Donald H. Wheat**, entering class of 1955, died March 5. He was 92. After graduating from Hiram College and the University of Chicago (BD), he served the Austin Boulevard Christian Church. In 1969, he became senior pastor of Third Unitarian Church, also in Oak Park. Third Church participated in the civil rights, fair housing, and Vietnam War struggles of those heady days. He was preceded in death by his wife, Ann.



MORE NEWS on Facebook and our website: ddh.uchicago.edu

Remembering Dolores Highbaugh

A lifelong advocate for transformation and education across the church, she was an inspiration and mentor to rising leaders.

Dolores Jones Highbaugh provided essential leadership for the Disciples following Restructure and Merger, including as one of the moderators of the General Assembly from 1975–77. She served on the General Board and its Administrative Committee, the Committee on Budget Evaluation, the Council on Christian Unity, and on key ecumenical dialogues.

Her example, encouragement, and ideas were formative for generations of students and deans at the Disciples Divinity House. She regularly participated in Monday dinners and programs, always bringing challenging questions for House Scholars as she urged them to become educators for all people in the church. When she was there, the church was there. Her mentorship was not a formal role—but it was one that she took on faithfully, lovingly, and with immense hope.

“We don’t always know what we are capable of as students, leaders, church people, and human beings,” Kris Culp commented. “But Dolores Highbaugh most often did. She might say on occasion that she was ‘only a lay person,’ but she was a giant of leaders, of thinkers, of envisioners. She knew, with canny, of what we are capable—and she knew and expected it of others as well.”

Born on April 15, 1927, to Cora (Spence) Jones and Dock Luther Jones, Dolores and her younger sister, Doris, were raised in Jackson, Mississippi. The family moved to Detroit as part of the Great Migration and, soon after, to Chicago, where they joined the extended Jones family—aunts, uncles, cousins.

In 1948, she was introduced to Richard Highbaugh, a former Tuskegee Airman who was pursuing his MBA at the University of Chicago. They married on October 30, 1949. They raised two children, Claudia and Earl Burton, and were proud that both graduated from the University’s Laboratory Schools. Claudia became the first African American woman to be ordained in the Disciples of



She might say on occasion that she was “only a lay person,” but she was a giant of leaders, of thinkers, of envisioners.

Christ after Restructure; she is also a member of DDH’s Board of Trustees.

Dolores and Richard served as elders and in many pivotal ways at Park Manor Christian Church, which they joined in 1953. They also maintained a presence in the old Second Christian Church in Indianapolis, where Richard’s parents were active members. Dolores gave important leadership in the Chicago Disciples Union and the Illinois-Wisconsin Region. She worked with Disciples Women in the regional and general church, including Quadrennial, and often alongside Sybel Thomas and Eddie Griffin.

Dolores Jones Highbaugh died February 27, 2026, in Chicago. She was 98. She is survived by her daughter, Claudia. She was preceded in death by her husband, Richard, who died in 2006, and by their son, Earl Burton, who died February 6. Services were held on April 18 at Park Manor Christian Church. The Highbaugh Family Fund, created at the Disciples Divinity House on the occasion of Dolores’s 95th birthday, ensures that the Highbaugh family’s profound example, commitment, and challenge are sounded for future generations of learners and leaders. ✚

A vital partnership

Laird Thomason pays tribute by extending a lifetime of connections.

Evelyn Thomason was a highly educated and accomplished individual who dedicated her life to law, community service, and her family. When she died January 15, 2025, at age 82, she and Laird Thomason had been married for sixty-one years. As the first anniversary of her death approached, Laird decided to create the *Laird and Evelyn Thomason Memorial Fund* with a \$10,000 unrestricted gift.

The fund remembers a partnership that began in Iowa and was

rooted in the deep soil of the Disciples of Christ. After meeting in a youth group, both attended Drake University. In 1963, they married at the Wakonda Christian Church in Des Moines.

By then, Laird had completed his first year of ministry studies at the University of Chicago as a Disciples House Scholar. He completed a formative internship with the storied alumnus Arthur Azlein at the Michigan Park Christian Church in

Washington, DC. Eventually, Laird became the minister of the Bethesda Christian Church in Maryland and, later, a chaplain. Evelyn completed law school and entered practice.



Their lives remained intertwined with the Disciples Divinity House even as they became centered in the Capital Area Region. Both were fully engaged in congregational, regional, and general Disciples work. Laird remains a key leader in the Disciples Justice Action Network (DJAN).

Laird’s gift helps to ensure that such vital connections extend to future generations—and thus to stand as a living tribute to Evelyn’s memory. ✚

At the hub of things

Welcome to Nancy McKee and Rachel Abdoler; gratitude to Heidi Haverkamp.



Nancy McKee has joined the Disciples Divinity House as Assistant Administrator, effective June 23. She has a background in finance and accounting, and significant experience as a personal assistant and with a company that assisted with trust arrangements for vulnerable individuals. She brings resourcefulness, practicality, and strong relationship skills. She has known about the Divinity House for a long time due to her aunt, Dolores Highbaugh.

Nancy was born and raised on the south side of Chicago. She attended Loyola and Roosevelt Universities, and loves to read, cook, and spend time with family and friends. The proud mother of one son, she has three adorable grandchildren. She says, “I am looking forward to being a part of the DDH crew.”

In addition, **Rachel Abdoler**, an MDiv graduate and DDH Scholar who will receive her PhD later this summer, will serve as Assistant Dean in a new part-time position for this academic year; she will begin in September. She will work with students to plan chapel services and programs as well as give leadership to various initiatives.



Heidi Haverkamp has been a crucial part of “the House” for the past two years. Her two-year appointment as Director of Programs, Assistant Administrator, and Writer-in-Residence concluded June 30. Monday dinners were a weekly focal point of Heidi’s ongoing attention. At the final Monday dinner of the year, students surprised her with a gift, and at



Convocation, the extended community raised a toast to her.

Despite two busy academic years with a major renovation sandwiched between them, Heidi made time for her practice of writing. She wrote studies for *Gather* on Ephesians, Amos, and Micah, and a lectionary column for *The Christian Century*. Look for her *Letters from a Part-time Hermit* on Substack, and for future work about “unknowing God” and on memorizing Bible verses for progressive Christians.

She says, “Perhaps the greatest gift of being Writer-in-Residence has been students stopping by the office to talk with me about writing in their own lives: how they might get started as a writer, what to do when they get stuck, and how to make writing a part of their future professional or pastoral lives.” Heidi anticipates serving as a priest in an Episcopal parish in the near future—and continuing to write. ✚

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Venturing forth
with courage
and hope

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First Amy
Northcutt
Scholar named

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History, memory,
and the work we
are called to do

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A toast of gratitude

Cheers to the graduates,
parents, partners, friends,
mentors, colleagues...