

COMMON THREAD



MORAVIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2021

CELEBRATING OUR 2020 AND 2021 GRADUATES

On Saturday, May 8, 2021, 19 students graduated from Moravian Theological Seminary (MTS). This concluded our 214th year, and commencement was held at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. We celebrated with not only our 2021 graduates but also our 2020 graduates.

We feel very fortunate that we were all able to gather together to celebrate this momentous occasion. MTS has been blessed to journey with our graduates during their time as students, and we look forward to a continued relationship as they continue the work to which each has been called.

The ceremony was a wonderful celebration of ministry, achievement, and mission. It was highlighted by a commencement address from Rev. Dr. Nelson Rivera, John Taylor Hamilton professor of doctrinal theology and director of the master of divinity program, and a graduate address from Charlie McDonald '21, master of divinity, who was chosen by his peers.



Our graduates:

Master of Divinity

Meagan Ann Ackerman
McWilliam Colon Sr.
Charles J. McDonald
Scott R. Rainey

Master of Arts in Chaplaincy

Grace Newswanger

Master of Arts in Clinical Counseling

Kennedy Ahn
Carla Bello
Rebecca Paige Coventry
Rasbell Espiritu Alvarez
Sarah Salma Moussa
Jessica Robinson
Andrew Romeo
Daniel J. Uncles

Master of Arts in Theological Studies

Robin Anne La Rosa Hannig
Ezekiel Kassanga
Michael Robert Moeller
Eric J. Schwartz

Graduate Certificate in Moravian Studies

Adriana Bliss Craver
Jeffrey Reed Lawson

MORAVIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY PARTNERS WITH LANCASTER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

By Rev. Dr. Heather Vacek

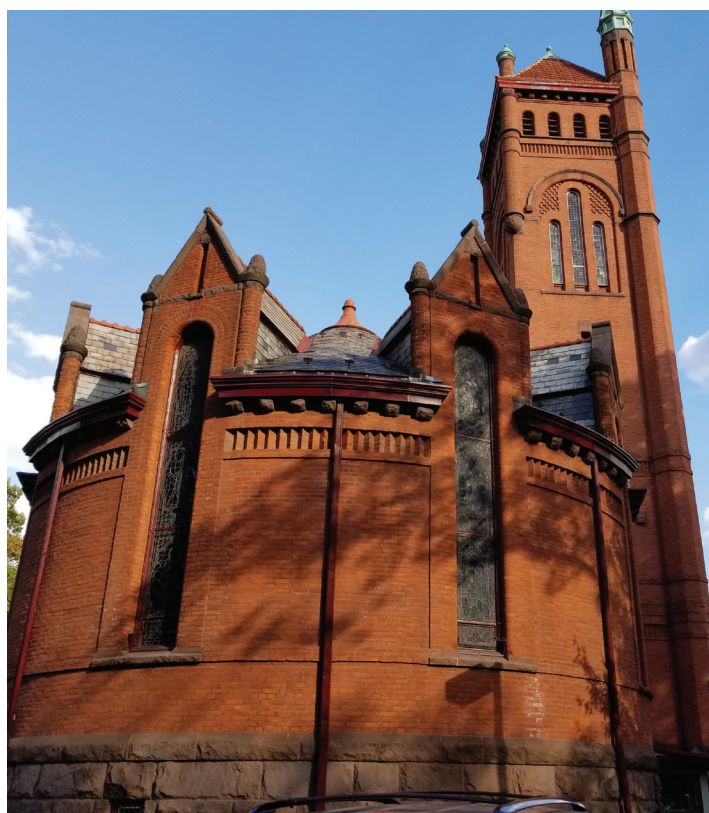
Vice President/Dean and Associate Professor of Church History

On July 10, 2021, a Special Synod of the Northern Province of the Moravian Church voted to approve the partnership between Moravian University and Theological Seminary and Lancaster Theological Seminary. The July Synod vote was preceded by six months of in-depth conversation about mission, curricula, faculty, governance, organizational structures, constituents, endowments, and financials that was undertaken by an exploratory committee consisting of faculty, board members, and administrators from each school. That due diligence made clear the mission and financial benefits of partnering.

The partnership is legally termed a “consolidation” and is in the very early stages. Full consolidation will take shape over four or five years and is carefully sequenced to secure proper approvals from accrediting bodies and regulatory agencies. At least through the 2021–22 academic year, the schools will operate as separate legal entities with distinct curricula but with shared leadership and increasingly coordinated operations. We anticipate that both seminaries will continue to exist as separately named schools.

Moravian and Lancaster Theological Seminaries (founded in 1807 and 1825, respectively) have long, faithful histories of providing educational and formational opportunities to equip clergy and congregations. The combination of the seminaries pairs Lancaster’s mission “to educate and nurture leaders to join in God’s redemptive and liberating work so that all creation may flourish” with Moravian’s mission to “equip persons with the knowledge, skills, and being to engage in vocations in ministry, chaplaincy, counseling, spiritual direction, and other settings.” Rooted in these commitments for centuries, both schools have served students from their denominations and a great variety of other traditions. Moravian Theological Seminary’s (MTS) welcoming of Lancaster Theological Seminary (LTS) into the shared work of theological education at Moravian University fits with historical commitments of the Moravian Church. The Moravian Ground of the Unity affirms that Christian unity is enhanced through receiving the gifts and graces of other faith traditions. In our work together, the seminaries strive to serve as a model of deepened relationships with internal and external constituents as we prepare and support pastoral and congregational lay and ordained ministers for service in our geographic region, in our home denominations, and more broadly.

Partnership with just any seminary would not make sense for either institution. Partnership between MTS and LTS, however, puts the schools in a formal relationship with a group of people (faculty, staff, students, alumni, church, and denominational leaders) who care about preparing students to serve God in the same sorts of ways. The two institutions have compatible missions and approaches to theological education, enabling the schools to partner to serve a range of constituents well, including those training for ministry



Lancaster Theological Seminary



in the Moravian Church and the United Church of Christ. We share commitments to ecumenism and justice.

We also differ in beneficial ways and hope to find strength in our diversity. Though compatible, our theological traditions and trajectories vary. We share some degree program offerings, but the rhythm of our academic lives varies, as do the details of course offerings. MTS holds mostly weekday classes; LTS's offerings are currently concentrated on weekends. MTS's student body is significantly more part-time. LTS offers a Doctor of Ministry degree; MTS does not. Our campuses are a 90-minute drive apart. MTS is the lone theological school of the Moravian Church in North America; LTS is one of six UCC seminaries. Our home denominations have different relationships with their seminaries. In this consolidation, we see difference as an opportunity to learn

and grow instead of an impediment to cooperation and service.

By combining with MTS, LTS will be able to take advantage of shared seminary and university resources in areas such as marketing, enrollment, advancement, finance, human resources, facilities, and information technology. In addition, to the extent that the Lancaster campus provides opportunities for the expansion of Moravian University program offerings at the graduate and undergraduate levels, the combination holds possibilities for strengthening the university system in which the seminaries reside.

Theological education at its best involves being in conversation—conversation with the past (through scripture and history) and the present (via congregations, leaders, faculty, and fellow students). Through conversation and cooperative work, faculty, staff, and students from MTS and LTS will deepen their own identities in individual traditions by building relationships with one another and their broader constituencies. We hope these relationships will model for students postures of cooperation and collaboration that will benefit them as they serve congregations, agencies, and individuals following graduation.

We covet your prayers in this time of transition. Even good change takes work and presents challenges for those involved. Pray for faculty, students, staff, and leadership as the seminaries partner and as we get to know one another. Stay tuned for updates about this exciting partnership. Δ



Lancaster Theological Seminary

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT



Rev. Dr. C. Riddick Weber
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry
Director, Center for Moravian Studies

Riddick Weber was invited to record music that will be part of the upcoming 70th-anniversary festivities for the Moravian Brass Band Union of South Africa (BBSA). Alex Hitzeroth arranged the music and will be editing together individual recordings sent in by numerous musicians. This follows up on similar work Riddick participated in for the Moravian Music Foundation's virtual Moravian Music Festival in the summer of 2021.

This past summer's festival also featured contributions from South African Moravians, as well as Moravians from many other parts of the Moravian world. Riddick will also be leading the Worship Ensemble at the 2022 Moravian Music Festival in Bethlehem, which will debut several new contemporary pieces written by Moravians. Δ



Rev. Dr. Deborah A. Appler
Program Director for the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy
Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

God created a beautiful world and set humans, animals, and plants to living together in this paradise (Genesis 1–3). While the humans were expelled from this first garden (Eden), the Hebrew Bible sets humans in another garden described in the Song of Songs—a space of beauty and intimacy with ups and downs. Gardens are often places of hope and life in the Bible. The nourishment and healing that come from growing food and other plants, and the very act of working the land, especially in community, can provide healing of body and spirit.

Those of us who have tended the Widow's House Garden continue to experience such healing and camaraderie as we plant, weed, water, and laugh together every year. This garden seeks to re-create as much as possible the colonial Moravian Garden planted near its current location on South Campus. In addition, the process of growing this garden hones our gardening skills while we learn how the Moravians used herbs to heal their community (and Lafayette during the Revolutionary War!). This garden has also been an important part of my class SEBK760 God's Gift of Creation: Sustainability, Economic & Food Justice in the Hebrew Bible, as well as my research on Jezebel, food justice, and food.

This past year, seminary volunteers (students, graduates, faculty, and staff) collaborated with the university's Ecology Club, who planted and watered seedlings in May and tended them over the summer. This fall, during Heritage Day, several hearty volunteers from the university pulled weeds and planted bulbs for the spring along with a cover crop that will prepare the soil for next year. Since the creation of the Widow's House Garden, many strong hands have gently tended the fruits of this soil. This November, we will begin to plan for next year's garden. We welcome all interested in joining us to contact the seminary office or me, directly, at applerd@moravian.edu. Δ



GET TO KNOW...

Rev. Dr. Heather Vacek

Vice President/Dean and Associate Professor of Church History

Rev. Dr. Heather Vacek joins Moravian Theological Seminary at a very exciting time in our history, overseeing the merger of Moravian with Lancaster Theological Seminary in her leadership role as Vice President and Dean. She also serves students in the classroom as Associate Professor of Church History. Learn about her vision for the future, how she plans to draw on the strengths of both seminaries, and what keeps her inspired and grounded.



What excites you most about your position as VP/Dean of Moravian Theological Seminary and Lancaster Theological Seminary?

I love being a seminary dean and relish the chance to work with students, staff, and faculty in crafting and implementing the mission

of the educational institution in service of God's work in the world. I understand the calling of theological deanship as tending well to the vocation of the institution and the vocations of those within it. As one ordained in the Moravian Church, it is a deep delight to do this work at the seminary of the tradition that has shaped my sense of identity and vocation.

This is a particularly exciting time to serve at Moravian Seminary as we initiate partnership with Lancaster Theological Seminary, a seminary of the United Church of Christ. The partnership brings together the strong witness and theological distinctiveness of each school's tradition in a way that enriches our work together and models for students the benefits and delights of thoughtful relationship.

What do you think makes Moravian Seminary unique and distinct?

Moravian Theological Seminary offers a range of degree programs and certificate offerings that provide students with a strong foundation for growth and success in a variety of vocations and ministries. That formation happens in small, lively classes that offer students ready access to knowledgeable and engaged faculty members. Faculty care deeply about student learning and well-being and are both subject matter experts and gifted practitioners with strong connections to the church.

How will the partnership between Moravian and Lancaster Theological Seminaries that began in the summer of 2021 enhance students' education and experience?

Over the next two years, the combined faculties of the seminaries will craft a new, shared curriculum that serves the needs of students from the Moravian Church, from the United Church of Christ, and from the many other churches and traditions represented in our student bodies. In the meantime, students will be able to cross-register for courses on the other campus to fulfill degree requirements at their home institution and are invited to participate in shared extracurricular activities in Bethlehem, in Lancaster, and online.

What is your vision for the sort of theological education offered at Moravian and Lancaster Theological Seminaries?

In service of our missions, I envision a seminary experience where

- Faculty and staff create spaces for students to be able to be fully themselves and discern the shape of their calls.
- Students learn and faculty do, too.
- Students challenge one other, support one another, and benefit from being part of a community of faith and learning.
- The wisdom and bravery of students makes the institution stronger.
- The insight and experience of faculty grounds students and equips them to serve well in a rapidly changing church and world.
- Students experience the world and the church, the past and the present, the divine and the deeply human.
- Coursework and the seminary community equip and embolden students to love and to change the world, one little pocket of it at a time.

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What Bible verse or quote brings things into perspective for you when you're facing these challenging, uncertain times? Any words of inspiration that keep you going?

For a number of years I've found comfort in the notion of God's steadfastness. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann reflected that while the Hebrew word *hesed* is often translated as "steadfast love," he's come to prefer the translation "tenacious solidarity." I appreciate that translation and think about that sort of tenacious solidarity as a desire to be present that won't, that can't, be stopped. I think about it as an unyielding accompaniment. God's tenacious solidarity—God's love and steadfast presence—sustains us in a variety of

ways, sometimes in the provision of people with whom to take the journey of life. God's tenacious solidarity also provides a model for the life of discipleship and the steadfastness with which I believe we are called to be with one another, amid both suffering and delight.

What feeds your soul and helps you recharge after a busy workweek?

I love being in the woods traversing trails by foot, whether running, hiking, or (in one of my newest endeavors) snowshoeing! I also love cooking and trying out new recipes with friends. Δ

Brigidda Zapata Bell Assistant Professor of New Testament

Brigidda Zapata Bell joined Moravian Theological Seminary this fall as Assistant Professor of New Testament. Bell defended her dissertation for her PhD from the University of Toronto this summer and previously taught at the Universities of Toronto, Calgary, and Alberta in Canada. Here, she shares with us how she's settling into her first semester and the joys of bringing her multilingual Canadian-Ecuadorian background to her teachings for a unique global perspective.



What is your impression of the Moravian Seminary community so far?

I've been warmly welcomed into Moravian Theological Seminary, and I'm learning that hospitality is at the center of the community. Our communal kitchen has already seen several events this year, and it is filled with

undergraduates at least once a week. While I understand it has been quieter than usual, I sense that community is valued and replenished in many creative forms.

How are you finding the remote/in-person hybrid schedule?

The emergency move to teaching remotely in 2020 posed huge challenges to instructors as we rethought our teaching, but since then I think many of us have learned that online teaching also presents distinct advantages for our students. Given that many of my students work day jobs, have children at home, and/or are in placements, logging into a classroom from home or jumping into office hours while on a lunch break has made learning much more accessible for them. At this point, half of my students are in the classroom and half of them attend the class online, but all of them participate actively in activities and discussions that are planned for the hybrid classroom.

What are you most looking forward to accomplishing in your first year teaching at Moravian Seminary?

I grew up in a bilingual English/Spanish household, and like so many bilingual Americans, I was still required to take that second language in school, although in my case the second language was English. I found it as dull as you would expect, but everything I know about English grammar I learned in my ELL [ESL] high school classes. That gave me a definite advantage when it came time to take on new languages in university. It also gave me a broader perspective on how languages could be taught in the classroom. I had a few amazing teachers who were both creative and gifted at language instruction. This will be the first year that I'm teaching entry-level ancient Greek in the classroom, and I'm hoping to re-create some of the wonder that I experienced in learning from my favorite language teachers.

How does your global perspective inform your teaching of the New Testament?

I am Canadian-Ecuadorian. My mother is from a small town in Northern Ontario, and my father was born in the mountains of Ecuador. I was born in Canada but spent most of my childhood in Ecuador, returning to Canada for university. This means that I traveled back and forth between North and South America a lot as a child and had to learn to navigate cultural differences and my own hybrid identity from a young age.

I am used to people telling me what they think I am based on how they perceive me—based on how I fit into their

own worldview. Many of the categories that we use to make sense of the world assume singular perspectives. Those categories don't allow for hybridity or complexity. I recall a moment in Ecuador in grade 3 when we were learning that countries had national languages, and the teacher called on me for an example. He asked what Canada's national language was, and when I replied English and French, he said that was impossible, that I should pick one. I recall being confused, then embarrassed; I felt he was upset that I couldn't answer the question correctly. I hang on to that example to this day because the right answer is both, but for some reason complexity felt threatening in that moment, in that classroom, to that teacher. And I hang on to that moment because it happened again and again in different classrooms and different places, when I presented complexity that stemmed from who I was and what I knew from my own diverse experiences.

The academic study of the New Testament began in 18th-century Germany and has a long and productive history of scholarship whose interests and questions reflect the time and place of its authors. We have inherited a rich set of categories from this tradition, but these largely stem from this singular perspective. Who I am informs the questions I ask in my scholarship, and I encourage my students to bring their whole selves to the table in engaging the Bible because the way they see the world will bring a different set of questions, more complexity, and added challenge to the discipline, and will greatly enrich their learning.

Tell us about the course you're teaching this semester.

This semester I am teaching a class on Paul's writings. Many of the things that we think we know about Paul stem

from later Christian tradition and not from what Paul says in his own letters. As a historian, it is important to me that students read Paul's work with an understanding of the social and historical context in which these texts were written. Our modern ideas about race as biological and static, for example, come from the 19th century, yet Paul's comments about Jews and Gentiles in Christ are often employed to suggest the racial egalitarianism of a universal gospel. Thinking about ancient constructs of ethnicity and race as fluid and essential to identity changes how we understand Paul himself, as well as his words.

For this class, my students write letters of historical fiction to Paul that engage with a particular controversy or pastoral issue that they or their group is facing. This project requires students to dig deep into particular aspects of the ancient world (geography, environment, social life, ritual practice, the culture of letter writing!), but it also pushes them to grapple with the practical consequences of Paul's thought as received by diverse people with complex identities and rich lives as imagined by them.

What has been your favorite aspect of living in the Lehigh Valley?

I moved [with her husband, Alex, and two young daughters] from the mountains of western Canada, which are absolutely breathtaking, but the winters are very long and cold, which makes the growing season quite short. I was thrilled to see how green it is in the valley and how much wildlife appears right in my backyard. I had missed the hum of cicadas in the summer and the sight of the monarchs migrating. I'm really looking forward to a true fall and watching the leaves change. Δ

TRANSITIONS AT MORAVIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

We've experienced multiple transitions among our staff this year and want to share these changes with you.



Both **Rachel Starmer**, our assistant director of administration, and **Amy Silvoy**, our associate director of marketing and communications, departed this spring for other opportunities in their respective areas of passion and expertise.



Our assistant to the director of enrollment and non-credit programs, **Josh Tonkay**, left in August as he prepared to begin graduate study in the fall.



Jane Weber, who has been for many years our director of administration after holding multiple other posts during her nearly 25-year tenure, stepped into retirement this September.



We'd also like to announce that **Rev. Randy D'Angelo** has transitioned out of his role as director of enrollment and assumed the director of administration post.

We deeply appreciate the contributions of our staff and hold them in prayer as they embark on new adventures. Look for future announcements as new staff members join our team!



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