

# focus

Boston University School of Theology

2020

## WHICH WAY NEXT?

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step into a time  
of uncertainty.  
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Cydney Scott



# BUILDING AN ARTISTIC LEGACY

## FACULTY AND STAFF ARE ELEVATING EXPRESSIONS OF ART AT STH

BY MARA SASSOON

For the last few years, STH has hosted exhibitions of artifacts you might expect to find in a big-city museum: an elaborate Tibetan religious tapestry, an ancient Egyptian canopic jar, Salvadoran embroidered textiles. The displays, in the school's library and Community Center, have been curated by Kara Jackman, archivist and preservation librarian. She's made it a goal to bring art into the everyday lives of STH community members, curating three to four art and history exhibitions each year that celebrate material from the school's archives and on-loan works from artists and museums.

"I hope that during classes, the art inspires new, fresh thought from the creative sides of students and faculty," says Jackman, who oversees a school archive containing historical records from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church and from STH. It also includes personal papers, art, and artifacts—ancient pottery and coins, historic posters, photographs—that have been donated by prominent New England Methodists and faculty members. When we look at a drawing or painting, Jackman says, we're often inspired to think differently about issues affecting the world. "Art may be the thing that helps us all come together."

Jackman has worked closely with Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore and other members of the STH community to come up with exhibition ideas, often focusing on themes of social justice. The winter 2020 show *In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World: Photography by Dan Wells* displayed a Harvard Divinity School student's nature photography and connected them to topics in ecology and theology. *Bordados De Memoria: Embroidering Memories For Peace*, on view at the library in late 2019, featured embroidered works created by women and children from El Salvador who were displaced during the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s. The pieces, which were loaned by the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen in San Salvador, were subsequently displayed at the Salvadoran consulate in East Boston.

Jackman's efforts aren't limited to temporary shows. In March 2019, she had stained glass windows from the former Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, sitting in the STH archives since 2011, installed in the library. The windows memorialize the founding members of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, a founding organization for today's United Methodist Women, including Harriet Merrick Warren,

wife of William Fairfield Warren, BU's first president.

"It's crucial to have great art around to not only enliven the spaces we inhabit in our school, but also to enliven creative, new ways of thinking about problems, whether in the classroom or in the world," Jackman says. And she's not the only one who believes in the importance of building an artistic legacy at the school. Around STH, staff and faculty are working to elevate the arts.

### ART AS A SACRED SPACE

When Andrew Shenton started teaching at STH in 2004, he noticed a lot of students were using poetry, music, visual arts, and more in their worship. But, he says, he felt the arts were underrepresented in the curriculum. So Shenton, James R. Houghton Scholar of Sacred Music, worked with Moore to start the Theology and the Arts Initiative. The goal, he says, was to give "a more prominent role to the arts" by highlighting the number of arts courses across the University available for STH students to take as electives.

Since the initiative launched in 2014, Shenton says STH has increased the number of courses blending theology with visual art, music, and literature that students looking to go into ministry can apply



STH's library now features a stained glass window memorializing the founding members of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Kara Jackman

to their degrees. An MDiv student can take Baroque Arts in Northern Europe or Cathedrals and Castles: The History of Art and Architecture of Medieval Europe, both offered through the College of Arts & Sciences' History of Art and Architecture department, for example.

A year after launching the initiative, Shenton began an annual arts contest, open to all BU students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The first was a poetry contest, followed by a photography contest, a hymn-writing contest, and, last year, another poetry contest. These competitions allow people from outside the STH community to engage with the school, he says. "They are not about Christianity as much as they are about God and spirituality." The photography contest, for example, had a broad theme: "Any place that you see God." Shenton was delighted to see that contest draw submissions from all over the University.

"The arts touch people in ways that mediate their relationship with their own God in some ways better than anything else," says Shenton, also an associate professor of music with a joint appointment at the College of Fine Arts. "Sometimes a painting or a sculpture can actually be a sacred space to you or a sacred thing without it coming into the confines of organized religious scriptures."

### MUSIC AND MINISTRY

Chad William Kidd ('05,'05) has also seen firsthand the powerful tie between art and worship—specifically music. "I have always felt most connected to God through beauty and awe, and for me



*A year after launching STH's Theology and the Arts Initiative, Andrew Shenton created an annual art contest. Rebecca Smith ('16, SSW'16) won the 2016 photography competition with this image, taken during an STH travel seminar to Israel/Palestine.*

that often manifests through music,” says Kidd, worship coordinator and director of the Seminary Singers, a non-audition choir comprised of STH students, faculty, and staff. Music, he says, “is transcendent of boundaries. Wordless or not, it helps us feel and emote like sometimes nothing else can.”

Kidd began performing with the Seminary Singers as a student and, in 2011, was hired to direct the group. The choir typically performs every Wednesday, at a weekly worship service that Kidd also coordinates,

although he hasn’t figured out how to continue their involvement during the coronavirus pandemic. “I love this job, because I really get to use the fullest and broadest set of my creative and artistic ministry gifts in a role that asks me to see a bigger picture of artistry in ministry and worship at the school,” he says. Kidd has also served as the minister of music at the First Congregational Church of Reading, Mass., United Church of Christ, since 2001. He says that his involvement in the Seminary Singers has shaped

him into the minister he is today and also influences how he thinks about coordinating worship services at STH.

“Many people who worship God in a communal setting report that music is one of the most integral parts of the experience for them. That sentiment is certainly true for me and has been all my life,” he says. Kidd recalls feeling called by God to be a minister while he was attending a church musical in college. After that, he switched his major from music performance to church music.



*Chad William Kidd ('05,'05) (left), directs the Seminary Singers in Marsh Chapel.*

Facing Page: Rebecca Smith; This page: Dave Green

Now, Kidd wants to create similarly powerful experiences for those who attend the Wednesday services. He thinks about how music can help make each service more impactful. Every time he plans a service, he asks himself questions like, “Should the choir anthem be sung directly after the Scripture is read and how might its text and music enhance how the Scripture is heard?” Or, “Should the invitation to prayer be sung by the congregation instead of spoken, and what role might that play in

the overall arc of the service?” Sometimes, he considers the effect of singing the Psalm versus reciting it or whether the organ or the worship band would make a better accompaniment for a particular song. He likes to think of each service in terms of a theme, usually driven by the sacred texts used that day. So he contemplates the role music plays in enhancing the themes and stories of the Scripture—where the choir can add levity or where the organ can add drama, for instance. And in the absence of the choir, Kidd says he

has students offering to share their musical talents in the online services.

Kidd strives to show students the value of incorporating the arts into their studies. “Sometimes our artistic pursuits are the first to go when our lives get busy. We might say we don’t have enough time to be in the church choir, or to keep painting, or writing poetry, or going to theater, and so we might try to cut those out as an expendable. But, to me, the arts are essential in ministry and in life and they have a core place at STH.” □