



MAINE CONFERENCE
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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A Just Peace, Open and Affirming Conference



Maine School of Ministry

theological education for the life of the church

Annual Report 2024

Rev. Dr. Malcolm Himschoot

This was a thriving year for MESOM, and a joy for me to continue in my second year, now as Settled Dean. The foundations of the School continue to serve the Maine School of Ministry well, from the time of its founding under Dean Bob Ross, to the work continued by Dean Ron Baard. MESOM now enters its 12th academic year, conveying generational resources of the life of the church through educational programming toward new leadership development.



MESOM's CSL curriculum continues: Christian Studies and Leadership. Part-time students may earn an intro certificate in Christian Studies, a secondary certificate in Pastoral Leadership, and a tertiary certificate in Word and Sacrament. The clearest picture of our program is found in our MESOM brochure. (See below.) This path – one of the 21st century's "multiple paths to authorized ministry" – is available to UCC Members in Discernment and Committees on Ministry. MESOM reduces barriers for those in place-based livelihood and ministry, especially across the class and physical geography of Maine.

The people are the church...

A tradition of faith carrying forward the legacy of Jesus depends on a community of people invested in forming one another, caring for each other, teaching and ministering to one another.

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Maine School of Ministry CSL 1 Certificate: Christian Studies is for anyone who wants to deepen their personal understanding, faith practice, or leadership in the life of their church.

This certificate includes 6 classes combining any foundational and practical areas of study. This initial study can lead some to seminary, others to pursue further certificates with MESOM, or both.

A journey toward ministerial authorization in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ will lead some to apply with their association to become Members in Discernment.



Leadership for a place and time...

LICENSED STANDING

Authorized and overseen by one association of the United Church of Christ on behalf of that association.

Congregations served by an authorized lay minister stay in covenant with the wider church through a yearly partnership reflecting on the life of the church and the growth of the pastor.

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

Maine School of Ministry CSL 2 Certificate: Pastoral Leadership includes 10 classes and 2 semesters of mentored practice (12 credits total). Foundational classes include: Bible, Church History, Theology, and Ethics and Culture, one of which incorporates world religions and indigenous traditions. Practical classes include Preaching, Pastoral Care, Leadership, and Worship.

Associations confer licensure at their discretion.



Across place and time...

ORDAINED STANDING

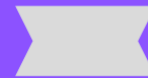
Authorized and overseen by one association of the United Church of Christ on behalf of all associations of the United Church of Christ.

In and on behalf of the church, ordained leaders steward the church's memory and imagination for baptism and communion, teaching, preaching, offering care, and leadership with a deep commitment to the life of the church over generations.

WORD AND SACRAMENT

Maine School of Ministry CSL 3 Certificate: Word and Sacrament includes everything in the prior certificate series, with increased depth of academic work for a total of 18 credits. Required classes include at least 4 classes in Bible, as well as a distribution of foundational and practical courses. Mentored practice is required, and at least two courses that incorporate world religions and indigenous traditions.

Associations fulfill an examination for ordination, before ordaining with prayer and the laying on of hands.



A student's 18 credits from MESOM are among the experiences and educational opportunities that equip them to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities to satisfy "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministry" for those led to represent the UCC through authorized ministry in and on behalf of the church.

Hundreds of participants have taken MESOM courses so far. A dozen are currently working toward a MESOM certificate. In the Maine Conference ten congregations are presently served by MESOM students and graduates.

Fall enrollments at the beginning of another school year showed growth for the School. Just as many new students are starting with MESOM or exploring certificate studies, as are continuing from past years. About half our participants are continuing students, and half are new. Each year curious, committed, and/or called people hear about MESOM and connect to our classes. MESOM's certificate education increasingly attracts some who are just beginning to find the United Church of Christ, and a variety of second-career and retired people responding to emerging bi-vocational leadings.

This year eight clergy in the Maine Conference partnered with us to deliver courses at the intersection of theory and practice. Their contribution was an investment in the learning

and spiritual journeys of passionate and gifted students. For some it was an investment in their own ministry of research, teaching, and scholarship as well.

Foundations

Throughout Maine, and in neighboring states, MESOM has an excellent reputation and capacity for its mission and purpose:

- To prepare competent and educated pastors for congregations by supporting pathways to ministry for committed persons responding to the call to ministry.
- To provide opportunity for education and spiritual growth to interested persons.
- To provide opportunities for education and spiritual growth in local church settings.

MESOM aims to provide all who feel so moved, from our own and from our partners' congregations, the educational opportunity to explore their callings to spiritual formation (or re-formation) and to preparation for authorized ministry. Certificate students experience guided inquiry running across the School's four teaching areas: *Biblical studies, theology, ethics and cultures, and church history*. In addition to those foundational areas, practical areas include *worship, preaching, leadership, and pastoral care*. Classes are conducted around a real or electronic seminar table and led by a well-qualified teacher.

Our broader culture is changing. No longer is membership in a local church an expectation of citizenship. No longer can knowledge of the Bible or of Christianity be assumed. Therefore, our churches need to change in order to proclaim the old story of God's love in Christ in ways that people can comprehend and incorporate today. Ministry is changing as well. While a seminary trained clergyperson is still the norm, there is an increasing need for the Church to develop new models for the preparation of pastoral leaders. The Maine School of Ministry is intended to be one such model, the Maine model, of theological education. This model understands the church to be a covenanting fellowship in which every member is needed, each has an important place to fill, and all share responsibility for church life and mission. This fellowship may call on one of its own to become pastor, and support and surround that individual with a learning community in which any member may explore a call to any given leadership role by entering into study with like-minded learners. This community will also enable its members to develop their callings and the churches themselves to identify pastoral leaders from inside and outside their congregations.

With the closing (2013) of Bangor Theological Seminary and before the significant challenges now facing so many Maine congregations—challenges well described by the Rev. John Dorhauer in *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (2015)—the Maine Conference UCC was already called to meet the educational

needs of members and congregations to variously engage in spiritual formation and preparation for authorized ministry. The economic constraints faced by working people and their families and by our less resourced and smaller churches across the state, unable as these are now to support a full-time pastor, as well as Maine's geographic distances, call for a new, creative approach to the preparation of pastoral leaders. MESOM seeks to embody this approach.



Photo: Rev. Dr. Larry Kalajainen was one of the committed scholar-practitioners who offered classes with MESOM this year, an ordained minister and consummate lecturer in New Testament.

Current Programs

Classroom Education

MESOM added a new January Term in 2024 and saw popular enrollment in David Gaewski's class **UCC History, Polity, and Theology** over Zoom.

In the Spring 2023 we offered **Ecology in Christian Faith History** with Stephen Hastings and Holly Morrison on Zoom, carrying lessons from the past into the future. We also offered the second part of **Intro to New Testament** in-person with Larry Kalajainen. Some continuing students took both courses and some took just one. Non-certificate students were among those who took one class.

Our June Intensive was focused on the spirituality of transition at retirement: **Leadership and New Beginnings in Identity, Community, and Belonging**. Pilgrim Lodge hosted this course as an in-person retreat, taught by Carol Kerr and Deb Jenks. For those who came as clergy, this course satisfied the Boundaries Education requirement of their Committee on Ministry.

In Fall 2024 MESOM offered two Zoom-based semester classes in Old Testament and in Applied Theology: **Reading and Interpreting the Book of Exodus** with John Holbert, and **Experiencing God in Story and Music** with Bill Bliss.

Two MESOM students undertook a Fall 2024 independent study in the history of **White Nationalism and the American Christian Church**. Their work includes a peer-based network for rural and remote churches at a divisive moment in history.

Contextual Education

The '24-'25 academic year begins a round of **Mentored Practice** with mentorship and placement for two students at Westford Warren Congregational Church and the Congregational Church of Boothbay Harbor.

MESOM supported three students on a '23-'24 experience in **Theology and Practice of Ministry in Your First Parish**, as recommended by their Committee on Ministry. This course did not involve placement by the School, but rather added reflection and relationship to those lay/Licensed ministers referred to us by a COM while leading solo in a congregation. Instructor Paul Shupe.

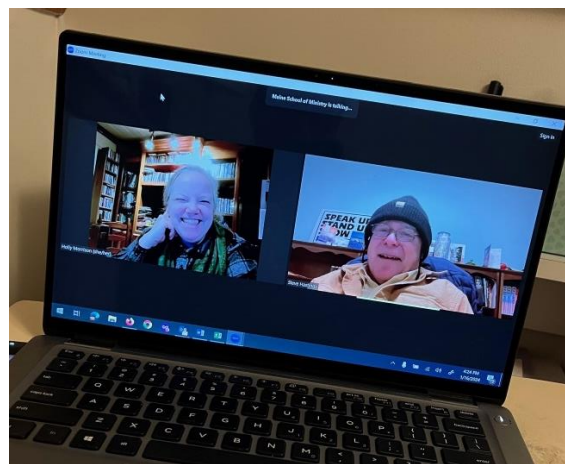


Photo: On Zoom, from a warm winter farmhouse and a cold winter church office, Rev. Holly Morrison and Rev. Dr. Stephen Hastings prepare for team-teaching a MESOM course.

MESOM Sunday, Outreach and Publicity

Sarah Mills and Ian Lynch created two social media videos (reels) this year for MESOM:

<https://www.facebook.com/mesomedu/videos/911723817168927>

<https://www.facebook.com/mesomedu/videos/3445160102297221>

Last year's YouTube video was created by Beth Hoffman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nSXC982SIc>

Compared to the prior year, almost twice as many local churches responded to our February event "MESOM Sunday" lifting up the Maine School of Ministry for gifts by congregations. Several churches hosted speakers and guest preachers relating to MESOM.

Ongoing email newsletters continued to raise visibility for the School and to invite individual gifts at: <https://www.maineucc.org/giving/>



Team Transitions

Members who rotated off the MESOM Advisory Team were Sharon Rankin and Larry Kalajainen. Many thanks for their visionary leadership, dedicated service, excellence in ministry, and principled example for others to follow.

New participants this year on the MESOM Advisory Team include Beth Hoffman, Joe Schulte and Beka Choate.

Continuing members of the MESOM Advisory Team include John Lacey, Nick Davis, Leslie Foley, and Sarah Mills. Bill Bliss serves as an Advisory Team liaison appointed by the Conference Board.

Funding

MESOM does not receive line-item funding from the Conference budget, but raises funds from tuition and scholarship dollars, grants and contributions. In-kind support contributions come from the Conference in the form of bookkeeping, technology, and HR support.

Total budgeted spending for the year 2024 was \$70,000. Student fees are kept to a minimum, offsetting approximately \$12,000 in instructor fees. In 2024, the Carpenter Foundation provided a grant of \$20,000 toward ½ FTE staff salary. The remaining \$38,000 in operating funds come from individual gifts, member churches of the Conference, and partner gifts, to be fund-raised each year.

Financial support subsidizing MESOM is sought from congregations, associations, and individuals. Please consider a yearly gift to the Maine School of Ministry if your passion and purpose involves church vocations and theological education. Anyone who would like to make a planned gift or legacy bequest is invited to consider a scholarship gift up to \$100K. Sustainability-generating legacy gifts are welcome. A gift over six-figures could be placed in reserve to fully fund the Dean's position and extend the MESOM program indefinitely.

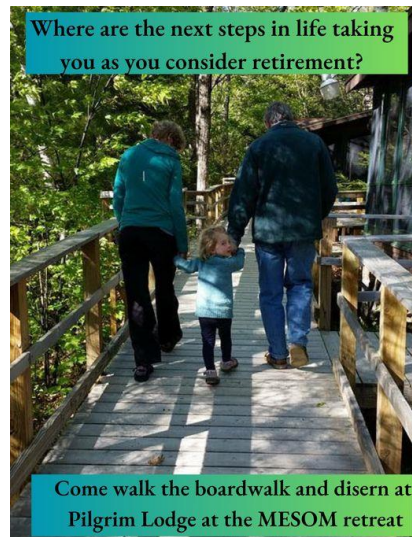


Photo: This year's MESOM June Intensive was hosted at Pilgrim Lodge.

Conclusion

Sacred leadership is a covenant one generation makes with another. Equipping people who are listening for the call of God with skills, knowledge, and abilities for ministry in the 21st century requires the Spirit activating many partners. This is what *church* does! Christ's church calls forth as leaders, those who will call forth the calling of the church. Pastors, grandmothers, scholars, teachers, and mentors all have a role in nurturing individuals' passion, equipping sacred leadership, and cultivating communal discernment. Committees on Ministry are living into this era through using "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministry" across many different contexts in the United Church of Christ. The Maine School of Ministry is an excellent partner in theological education for the life of the church, sharing resources that God has provided.