



SOUTHERN BULLETIN

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FEATURES

The bridge between medicine and theology

From the seminary to Senegal

An exploration of land and church history

Meet the Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Rector's Letter

In Memoriam

GET IN TOUCH

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Drawn to a career in healthcare chaplaincy, Lillian Okoronkwo, M.Div. '25 (center), believes in a holistic approach to medicine.

The bridge between medicine and theology

Seminary student **Lillian Okoronkwo, M.Div. '25**, has travelled much of the world and lived in many countries.

"I spent the first 19 years of my life in the Middle East, mostly in Israel, but also lived in Egypt and Syria. My secondary school was in the United Kingdom, undergraduate studies (pre-med) in Boston and Miami, then medical school in the West Indies and completed my medical education in Nigeria," shared Okoronkwo.

After completing a year of National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and working at a hospital in Nigeria, she followed in her father's footsteps and joined the United Nations — traveling for work in post-conflict societies before reaching a point where she decided to pursue a long-held interest in public health.

"Medicine is one on one — which I love — it will always be my passion. But I want to have a wider platform to reach more people about health," said Okoronkwo, whose travels then brought her to the University of South Carolina to complete a Master of Public Health (MPH). "However,

once I finished my master's degree, a lot of the positions that I was seeing were research orientated, and I am a more grassroots, in-the-field type of person — I wanted to work towards health education, health promotion and changing of behaviors."

This led her to join Eau Claire Cooperative Health Center in Columbia, South Carolina, as the chief clinical operations officer. In this role, she led and directed clinical operations for about 25 sites that delivered health services to underserved communities across four counties in the state. Despite finding it rewarding, Okoronkwo was ready for the next step in her career and felt a call to do more.

"I was engaged in the welfare of my teams. I supported my core team and together we were oversight for all the clinicians (physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners) and support staff (medical assistants, receptionists, etc.). But I think deep in my heart, I wanted a way to mix ministry with medicine," she shared. "The landscape overseas is very different when

it comes to medicine, particularly in Africa. What I enjoyed there is, while consulting patients, you are free to talk about how you can help them with the spiritual side of things — whereas I find here in the U.S. it seems to be more restrictive how we talk about God and spiritual aspects of people's lives."

In an effort to combine medicine and ministry, she completed chaplaincy training in Charleston, South Carolina, and worked as a chaplain resident for Roper-St. Francis Hospital.

"That was a very satisfying moment for me, and I felt this is really what has been in my heart, being able to talk to patients about their spiritual lives. It was so rewarding just to talk with them, whether before a surgery or after they received bad news. It is an amazing experience to spend time with people and know that they are part of my journey and reconnecting me with medicine — as I walk alongside them on their own journeys to spiritual health and bodily well-being."

CONTINUED PAGE 3

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

From the seminary to Senegal

In November 2022, a routine email check put **Josh Kenst, MTS '23**, on a path that led him to his current mission in Senegal.

"I had just returned from Karlsruhe, Germany, where I'd traveled with the Rev. Dr. Melanie Dobson's class to the World Council of Churches," said Kenst. "I'd met some people from Africa and they encouraged me to visit. Then I got emails from the ELCA recruiting for the global mission program a few months later. The timing seemed right for the place I was in my life."

Kenst applied with an eye on serving in West Africa. He was assigned to a post in Senegal and arrived there in August 2023 for a year-long volunteer stint.

"There are a lot of complexities in global mission work, which the church is working to reframe in a positive way. Here in Senegal, the ELCA partners with two different Lutheran bodies, and volunteers like me are assigned where we're needed, where our skills fit," Kenst explained.

His work in Senegal has been oriented toward preschool students, creating picture books and Sunday School lessons that are distributed throughout the country. Kenst earned his undergraduate degree in youth ministry and theology from Thiel College — and he has a longstanding interest in creative writing — but his studies at LTSS were also formative.

"Really, every class I took, and all my professors shaped and prepared me for this work. I wouldn't be able to do this now without them."

Although the distance from family and loved ones has shown Kenst that global work is not his long-term future — he is considering chaplaincy or possibly academia — he has valued his time in Senegal.

"The heat and the language barrier have been challenging," he said. "However, a huge part of the culture is 'teraanga,' which is a radical hospitality. They make sure everyone is well cared for, and that has been a joy to see and take part in." ●



Josh Kenst, MTS '23

RECTOR'S LETTER



The Rev. Dr. Chad Rimmer
Rector and Dean

Friends, grace and peace be yours in the name of Christ.

Since 1830 the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary has been fulfilling its mission to teach, form and nurture leaders for public ministry. My great-grandfather, W.G. Cobb, was in the entering class when Beam Hall first opened in 1911. And since LTSS moved to Columbia, a member of each generation of my family has been here, from my great-grandfather, to my grandfather, my uncle and now me. Across those 113 years, many of you and your families have also lovingly tended the mission of our beloved seminary.

During these two centuries, from our beginnings in Pomaria to Lexington, to Newberry, to Walhalla, to Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia, to Mt. Pleasant, and eventually to Columbia, South Carolina, in 1911, we have faced financial challenges, wars and epidemics that have threatened our capacity to continue this Lutheran and ecumenical tradition of theological education and formation. But we have always found a way to persist and to discern and follow what it means to best steward this gift and call that has been entrusted to us.

And now, the next stage in Southern's long history of pilgrimage is beginning.

After prayerful, careful discernment, the board of trustees of Lenoir-Rhyne University has made the decision to move LTSS to the university's main campus in Hickory, North Carolina, in January 2025. The reasons for this decision are clear. While many have faithfully and valiantly guided our seminary through difficult years, including the psycho-social and financial pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, the time has come to realize that without bold action, the mission of the seminary is not sustainable. But with this move, we can sustain the next chapter of our beloved seminary as a living laboratory for public ministry, where students will have opportunities to build their capacity for ministry with a vibrant formation and community life, and interdisciplinary opportunities.

When the seminary moves to Lenoir-Rhyne's Hickory campus, students preparing for ministry will have more access to courses in fields related

to ministry and will also be able to take advantage of campus amenities for recreation and arts and culture. We will create new pipelines for undergraduate students and the next generation of pastors and theologians, and expand our lifelong learning opportunities for lay and clergy leaders. At the same time, the Lineberger Library will move with us to Hickory, ensuring that our students continue to have access to the best resources available for us to strengthen our call to engage in transformative theological education and formation.

There is both sorrow and hope in this news. We will bid farewell to some of the places where generations of faithful leaders have learned, worshipped, and been formed. But our mission — to prepare leaders for the Church's public ministry — will remain unchanged. We are crafting a transition process that is as participatory as possible. I encourage you to take part in various fora that are being planned, such as Zoom meetings and space for fellowship and conversations in the coming days. We will mark the pilgrimage with liturgies of thanksgiving for this sacred ground and the places that have been sanctified with our study, worship, fellowship, and service. We will bring pieces of our chapel and other artifacts, to honor both the grief and promise of this moment.

As we journey from Columbia to Hickory, I will encourage you to keep your eyes on 2030. This year will be the 200th anniversary of Southern's founding. 2030 will also be the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Making this move will ensure that we are celebrating the 200th anniversary of the seminary in a way that looks to the next 200 years. And we will be embodying the genius of the Lutheran tradition that emerged from the nexus between the church, the academy and the public space. *Semper reformanda*. This move can position LTSS to be a flagship of the next stage in our mission to educate, nurture and form leaders for public ministry. ●

The Rev. Dr. Chad Rimmer, Rector and Dean



The Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace, M.Div. '96

The Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace, M.Div. '96, joined LTSS as director of the Center for Lifelong Learning in December 2023.

"When I heard that Dr. Chad Rimmer was the new dean and rector here, that really excited me," shared Wallace. "I've known him for a while, and so the opportunity to do something with him and be creative with him led me to apply for this position."

As the director of the Center for Lifelong Learning, Wallace coordinates all aspects of non-degree education at LTSS by fostering strategic partnerships, developing continuing

Meet the Rev. Dr. Beverly Wallace

education and its funding sources, marketing course offerings, and preparing and managing program budgets. She also works to identify lectures and non-degree courses aimed at preparing people for public ministry and offering continuing education — linking lifelong learning to Explore Courses open to non-degree students to increase engagement with LTSS degree programs.

"The creativity and thinking outside of the box as part of the director role are really inspiring to me," she shared. "As far as theological education, I've been teaching in various seminaries and divinity schools for 15 years or more, so I know what it's like to do a Master of Divinity program, but for me, it's the expansion of this work outside of the regular classroom to broaden it to the community — those who already have a theological education, those who don't even know what theological education is like — to open those doors, that's what excites me about this."

Prior to joining LTSS, Wallace was an associate professor of congregation and community care at Luther Seminary in Minnesota. She also served part-time at Virginia Theological Seminary for their Lilly Endowment grant "Thriving in Ministry" as the project's co-director, training coaches to mentor Episcopal priests. Wallace designed the ELCA's Womanist Initiative to provide opportunities for learning Womanist theology for seminarians, laypersons and clergy with an expansive vision to work with college-aged students, introducing them to understandings and experiences of global African perspectives.

"I used to be a hospital chaplain, and so you saw grief and loss, death and dying all the time. When I was doing my Ph.D. in family, social science, marriage and family therapy, one of the professors that I was working with — he was an anthropologist and been doing a lot of grief work around the world and knew my background in chaplaincy — asked me to get involved with his research talking about the lived

experiences of African Americans in particular, which led me to doing my own research into the topic," she shared. "Oftentimes when you think about grief and loss, you're thinking about death, but there's a multitude of losses — loss of mobility, loss of opportunities because you're older, loss of the freedom that you had to climb mountains. So, what drew me to this is the expansive nature of grief and loss. And because oftentimes we don't hear, nor do we make space for persons to talk about their grief and loss experiences."

Wallace is a member of the steering committee of the Lutheran Association of Teaching Theologians as well as the Board of Lutheran Women in Theology and Religious Studies. She is also an active member of the Conference of International Black Lutherans, a member of the Society for the Study of Black Religion and a member of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc.

Her new project "Ela Viveu" works with women scholars in Portugal and Brazil incorporating her Womanist vision. Wallace has authored several articles and book chapters, including "Hush No More: Constructing an African American Lutheran Womanist Ethic" and "The Slay Factor," recognizing the 40th anniversary of the ordination of African American Lutheran Women. Wallace is also a contributor to "Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections" and is co-author of the book "African American Grief."

"As a graduate of the seminary, I never thought about coming back, but here I am. And so, I am searching for the answer to 'what's God up to in this place?' It's a spirit-filled moment in the life of this institution. I truly do believe that. So with Chad and the faculty and the staff, we're going to make it shine so everyone can see this light that is Southern Seminary." ●

IN MEMORIAM

The Rev. Robert Earl McCombs '55 3/2/2024

The Rev. Dr. Carl Melchior Fisher '58 11/17/2023

The Rev. Charles Ray McManus '59 1/20/2024

The Rev. Robert Thaddeus Hughes '70 4/3/2024

The Rev. Dr. Michael Wayne Frye '73 3/15/2024

The Rev. Dr. Derald Henry Edwards '83 10/12/2023

The Rev. Robert Cecil Warren '83 11/24/2023

The Rev. Herbert Norton Rosebrock '89 10/22/2023

The bridge between medicine and theology continued



Lillian Okoronkwo, M.Div. '25

Drawn to a career in healthcare chaplaincy, Okoronkwo is working on her Master of Divinity at LTSS. As she advances through the program, she has adapted a tagline of sorts.

“One of my main sayings is we need to make the healthful choice become the default choice for all people. And when we talk about health, it

means holistic health — this includes every human being, every system and government — and we need to make sure that as people go through their daily lives, they choose the helpful and healthful options of anything they're trying to choose between as the default selection. Barriers need to be eliminated that keep them from being able to accomplish this goal. An example of this is diet. We keep telling people to eat the right foods, but it's so much more expensive to eat organic foods, so the accessibility of eating better is taken away for many. We ask people to walk more, but then we don't have sidewalks or safe areas for them to walk outside. I really want us to think about making healthy choices an intentional and willful action,” said Okoronkwo.

When it comes to spiritual health, she believes that you cannot live life without attending to your spiritual needs

“One of my main sayings is we need to make the healthful choice become the default choice for all people. And when we talk about health, it means holistic health – this includes every human being, every system and government – and we need to make sure that as people go through their daily lives, they choose the helpful and healthful options of anything they're trying to choose between as the default selection.”

LILLIAN OKORONKWO, M.DIV. '25

because spiritual health affects the whole self.

“I believe each human being has a spiritual need which must be satisfied in order for one to be well. If you have a strong, healthy physical body and your mind is alert, but your spiritual needs are unmet, I believe you will struggle through life because your whole being is not well. We are spirit beings created by God, therefore we must align all the parts of us, our physical bodies, our minds, our hearts, our spirituality.”

While completing chaplaincy training in Charleston, Okoronkwo saw physical health and spiritual health needs intersect on a daily basis, which solidified her approach.

“Some patients were of Christian faith but did not want to pray in that moment — either they were hurting badly or had some other reason. So, we didn't pray — we talked and sat together. Others who were not Christian would say, ‘Can you just pray?’ And I'd ask, ‘Well, since you're not Christian, how would you like me to pray?’ They would ask me to pray any way I liked,” she shared. “We can't assume what people need unless we talk to them. It is only then we can help them meet these spiritual needs. Once these conversations happen, people oftentimes start feeling better, brighter and more encouraged. Even though you haven't done anything for them physically, such as giving medication, people sometimes just need to be in the right place spiritually before they can really understand why they should keep taking their medicines. It will not solve all the problems the patient is facing but can be a large contributing factor to overall health.”

After travelling to many places in her life, Okoronkwo does not know her next stop after she graduates from LTSS.

“I am waiting on God to lead me to a location, but taking care of people's spiritual needs in community environments — that is where my heart lies, and I will follow it.” ●



Susan McArver, Ph.D., took a deep dive into the role of the church behind the history of colonization and domination over Indigenous peoples in the Americas during her fall Explore Course, “The Land and its Inhabitants.”

An exploration of land and church history



Rocky Boy's Reservation located in north central Montana. Photo courtesy of USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service.

In her 2019 Maymester course, **Susan McArver, Ph.D.**, escorted a small group of students to Montana. The group spent two weeks immersed in Chippewa Cree culture on the Rocky Boy's Reservation, and there on the plains of north central Montana, an idea began taking shape.

“I developed a deeper interest in our relationship with the land we occupy,” said McArver. “I was thinking about what it means to live on land that was occupied by Christian nations imposing their will on the land and the people living there. I wanted to look into that history and learn what that means for us today.”

Four years later, McArver brought these and similar ideas to a new initiative at LTSS, the Explore Course — a one credit hour course that takes a deep dive into a focused topic. Her Explore Course, “The Land and its Inhabitants,” ran in fall 2023.

“Explore Courses give degree students a taste of subjects that might not otherwise fit into their schedule,” McArver explained. “Or non-degree students can enroll as continuing

education — in the case of pastors or deacons — or just as an individual with an interest in a topic.”

“The Land and its Inhabitants” looked at the role of the church behind the history of colonization and domination over Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

“We looked at the fact that the church was an active initiator of the problem and is now working to address it,” shared McArver.

In addition to history, students delved into restorative justice. McArver collaborated with Vance Blackfox, ELCA director of Indigenous ministries and tribal relations, and Pastor Jack Russell of Living Waters Cherokee Lutheran Church — both of whom shared their experiences and modeled an approach to ministry that acknowledges history in a productive way.

“The course gave students some tools to help them continue studying and thinking about these ideas and lead worship on these topics,” said McArver. “And they could hear the voices beyond the white European perspective.” ●



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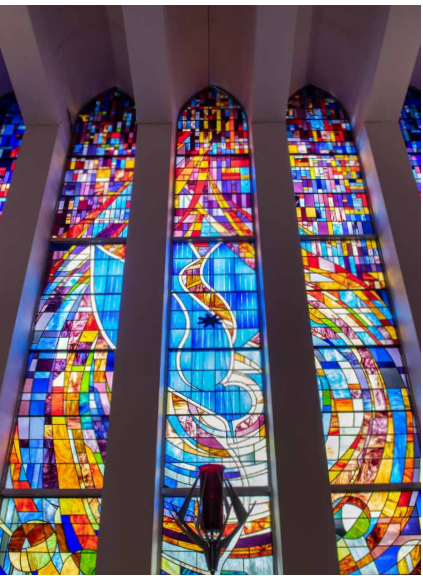


UPCOMING EVENTS

MAY
9 Commencement

AUGUST
26 First day fall semester

AUGUST
26-29 First Week



INSIDE THE NUMBERS: GIVING

\$1,106,287

DOLLARS RAISED FOR LTSS AS OF MARCH 31, 2024
THIS MARKS A 25% INCREASE IN GIVING YEAR OVER YEAR!

11.16%

ALUMNI PARTICIPATION AS OF MARCH 31, 2024

\$191,001

GIFTS TO THE NEW LIFE FUND