



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 – September 2025 **Rev. Dr. Malcolm Himschoot**

This past year showed excitement in the vitality of MESOM's program and the possibilities ahead for our students, mentors, and instructors. The number of students is growing. People are responding to 21st century theological questions related to faith and spiritual life. Some are responding to the call of God toward leadership in the life of the church. MESOM offers the support of classroom and contextual education for lifelong learning and community.

MESOM's CSL curriculum is intentionally streamlined for 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 in rural and remote locations across the economic and physical landscape of Maine.

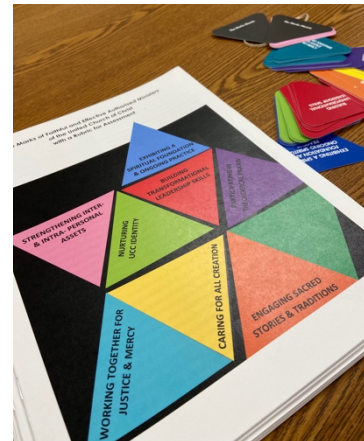


PHOTO: The Marks represent UCC conversation around ministry.



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 unique participants have taken MESOM courses over the past thirteen years. Not all are working toward a MESOM certificate, but all benefit from a deeper dive in areas of practice and reflection.

Fall enrollments to date show 18 slots filled in semester classes, with another 4 learners involved in a year-long Special Course called "Ministry In Your First Parish." Most MESOM students begin their studies prior to a formal Member in Discernment process. At the same time, many are already in roles of lay pastor leadership. MESOM's certificate education accompanies a variety of career and retired people responding to bi-vocational leadings. Throughout the Maine Conference, 13 congregations are presently served by MESOM certificate students and graduates. In more than one way, the church calls forth faithful leaders – to call forth the calling of the church!

This past year a record number of United Church of Christ ministers, and one Muslim chaplain, partnered with MESOM 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 mentors and instructors, it was an investment in their own ministry of research, teaching, or scholarship as well. Living into this part of a minister's calling – lifelong learning and leadership development – is an invaluable contribution to theological education for the life of the church.

Rev. Dr. John Holbert
Rev. Bill Bliss
Rev. Shernell Edney Stilley
Aida Mansoor
Rev. Anne Dunlap
Rev. Todd Weir
Rev. Leslie Foley
Rev. Deb Duval
Rev. Dr. Malcolm Himschoot

Rev. Kelli Whitman
Rev. Joan Murray
Rev. John Fiscus
Rev. Christine Dyke
Rev. Geoff Parker
Rev. Sharon Rankin
Rev. Dr. David Cleaver-Bartholomew
Rev. Dr. AbbyLynn Haskell
Rev. Dr. Jim Gertmenian



Photo: Kelli Whitman shares with students and authorized ministers gathered in community at the MESOM June Intensive retreat.

Foundations

Throughout Maine, and in neighboring states, MESOM has an excellent reputation and capacity for its 13-year 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.

The 2025 book *A Little One Shall Lead*, by Susan Craig and Doug Dunlap, describes the changing landscape for ministry and the challenges faced by small-town congregations. Even before the closing (2013) of Bangor Theological Seminary, the Maine Conference UCC was already working toward meeting the educational needs of members and congregations to engage in spiritual formation and preparation for authorized ministry. 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: Students and practitioners explore technology in embodied worship.

Programs

Classroom Education

In the 2024-25 academic year MESOM offered **Applied Theology: Experiencing God in Story and Music** with Bill Bliss, then **Applied Ethics: Building Up a Thriving World** with Anne Dunlap. Both courses integrated scripture, critical thinking, and communal practices of discernment at a deep level.

Additional '24-'25 courses included academic study of the Bible with John Holbert who taught **Interpreting the Book of Exodus**, and a global/local approach to **Introduction to Islam** with Aida Mansoor.

MESOM reprised the new January Term in 2025 and saw high enrollment in Shernell Edney Stilley's course in **UCC History, Polity, and Theology** over Zoom.

A June Intensive focused on **Embodied Worship in Today's Church**. Led by Leslie Foley, this combination of a Zoom intensive and in-person retreat involved hands-on learning from several Maine congregations.

The current 2025-26 academic year now begins with **Preaching as Prayerful Communication**, led by AbbyLynn Haskell with Jim Gertmenian, and a survey of **Old Testament II: Psalms, Wisdom Literature, and Prophets** with David Cleaver-Bartholomew of the New York School of Ministry.



Photo: Graduate Sarah Mills receives her CSL3 certificate, awarded by the Maine School of Ministry for completion of the Christian Studies and Leadership program.

Mills was approved for ordination pending call by the Living Waters Association on the basis of her written paper and Member in Discernment portfolio displaying "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers."

Contextual Education

The '24-'25 academic year completed a round of **Mentored Practice** with mentorship and placement for two students at Westford Warren Congregational Church and the Congregational Church of Boothbay Harbor. These were significant and positive experiences for each local church, for the mentoring pastor, and for the student pastor.

MESOM is supporting four students on a '25-'26 experience in **Theology and Practice of Ministry in Your First Parish**. This Special Course does not involve placement. Rather MESOM adds the support of reflection and relationship to those referred by a Committee on Ministry who are lay or licensed ministers already leading in a congregation.

Outreach and Publicity

The Maine Conference champions MESOM Sunday once each year in February. Congregations who participate lift up MESOM materials and ask for a special offering, or they add MESOM into their line-item mission giving. Several churches hosted speakers and guest preachers relating to MESOM. Media pieces and worship liturgy create meaningful moments for a local church to connect to the future church, and to the opportunity for theological education through lifelong learning and leadership development.

Facebook Reels:

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

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

YouTube:

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

Testimonial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwphK6m3WzE>

Newsletter:

<https://mailchi.mp/maineucc/mesom-update-spring2025>



Team Transitions

New participants this year on the MESOM Advisory Team are Bob Evans and David Heath. Bill Bliss serves as an Advisory Team liaison appointed by the Conference Board.

Continuing members of the MESOM Advisory Team include John Lacey, Nick Davis, Leslie Foley, Beka Choate, Beth Hoffman, and Sarah Mills. Many thanks for their visionary leadership, dedicated service, excellence and example for others to follow.

Funding

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

Total budgeted spending for the year 2025 was \$72,000. Student fees are kept to a minimum, offsetting approximately \$15,000 in instructor fees. In 2025, the Carpenter Foundation provided MESOM a grant of \$20,000 toward the Dean's ½ FTE staff salary. The remaining \$37,000 for operating is to be fund-raised each year from individual gifts and member churches of the Conference. Financial support for MESOM is sought from congregations, associations, and individuals. If your passion and purpose involves theological education and church vocation, please consider a yearly gift to the Maine School of Ministry. Scholarship gifts and planned gifts are also welcome.



Photo: In the garden of Boothbay Harbor Congregational UCC, Dean Malcolm Himschoot takes a walk to pray for the teaching vocation of the church.

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. Grandmothers, pastors, 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 using "The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministry" across many different contexts in the United Church of Christ. The Maine School of Ministry serves as an excellent partner in theological education for the life of the church, sharing the resources that God has provided.