THE ECUMENICAL CHAPLAINCY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ECUT

CALLING OUR FRIENDS

Spring 2025 Volume 20

From the Chaplains

Chaplain Jeanette Unger

At our last grief support group for the term, a returning student shared her experience of grief. For her, grief is something to grow around, not get over. I am struck by this image of growth as a beautiful image for campus ministry. Growth doesn't avoid the hard or difficult things, growth happens around, in, and through. The time we've spent with and among students this year has been a time of growth in leadership, community, and faith. We had conversations that explored big questions. We honoured grief. We prayed. We laughed at funny memes and silly mistakes. We held space for difference. We walked on a pilgrimage. We studied the Bible. We raised funds. We welcomed each other. In 1 Peter 2:18, we are invited to continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, even when the world is hard and unpredictable. Blessings to all and each of us as we continue to grow.

ECUT Student Leadership Team

This year ECUT had a vibrant and energetic student ministry team of eight student leaders who gathered weekly to plan, organize, and lead campus ministry programs—from worship and prayer to spiritual practices, Bible study, and community gatherings.

The ministry team students arrived at ECUT in various ways. Some, like Catherine Bergs, James Aitchison, Christina Kim, and Peter Haresnape, were theological students completing practicum placements as part of their degree programs. Others, like Nic da Silva, Coordinator for the Student Christian Movement at U of T, and Linda Endicott, worship intern for Knox College Chapel, came through collaborative partnerships with campus colleges and organizations. ECUT also hired two undergraduate students, Chloe Kim and Cindy Wu, to develop programming in eco-spirituality and queer Christian spirituality thanks to a partnership with St. Mike's Campus Ministry and a grant from the C. Jean Moore Endowment Fund of The United Church of Canada Foundation.

Building Community

Together, these students formed a team that became the heart of ECUT's student ministry during the past year. They met every Tuesday at noon to strategize programs, reflect on faith, and build meaningful community.

Student leadership….

For first-year student Chloe Kim, joining the ministry team as an intern for eco-spirituality was a way to find connection in the midst of the overwhelming size of U of T. “It’s really easy to feel like a number here,” she said. “I was kind of scared of getting lost in my faith journey, so I wanted to get involved in something that would help me grow, and at the same time, contribute to a team. I’ve always been really interested in environmental justice, too.”

Christina Kim, a Knox College MPS student, describes her experience of the team’s weekly gatherings as more than just meetings—they were moments of grace and joy. “I don’t know if we usually think of meetings as enjoyable or inspiring joy,” she reflected. “But I do observe that in our weekly meetups, we were encouraged to share our own gifts and grow in our calling.” Christina saw the team’s work as a blend of administrative skill, teaching, encouragement, and hospitality, gifts they shared in service of a broader vision of inclusive and welcoming ministry.

That vision took shape in countless ways across campus. Cindy Wu, as the Social Justice and Inclusion Ministry Team Coordinator, launched a Queer Interfaith Meetup Group which became a space for honest, vulnerable conversations across diverse identities and faith backgrounds. “Seeing participants courageously share their stories highlighted for me just how essential and impactful our inclusive approach at the chaplaincy is,” she shared.

Other students focused on carving out space for spiritual practices and reflection by cultivating collaborative partnerships. Nic da Silva and the Student Christian Movement partnered with Cindy Wu to host several Queer Interfaith Services at Knox College and Trinity College chapels throughout the year. James Aitchison offered meditation circles and helped organize a winter retreat in partnership with Nic da Silva and the Student Christian Movement at Five Oaks Retreat Centre.

James commented, “All of our work was geared towards making more space for students to connect with one another, with God, and with themselves.”

Catherine Bergs created a Bible Study for Overthinkers at Emmanuel College, as a safe space to connect with sacred text without worry about judgement or grades. “Bible Study for Overthinkers was launched in the winter term to provide students with an opportunity to connect with Scripture in an emotional and spiritual way. I think it's very common for seminarians to become a bit disenchanted with the Bible and theology as they are mediated through the critical lens of academia. Bible Study for Overthinkers was a community where we could listen to the instinct of our bodies, the insight of our minds, and the conviction of our spirituality, and share whatever came up for us.”

For Peter Haresnape, the heart of the chaplaincy’s ministry was found not only in programs, but in small, everyday acts of care. “The chaplaincy team works so beautifully within the campus community, and I was quickly invited to help with chapel services and events. While I've enjoyed planning the Lenten Pilgrimage and meeting for formal times of prayer, the loveliest thing to witness and participate in are the numerous small acts of care and welcome that take place in and around the chaplaincy office. This is not just a testament to the individual chaplains, but to the culture of welcome that has been nurtured for so many years.”

Looking ahead, ECUT is excited to build on this momentum. Over the next three years, a key goal is to formalize the Student Ministry Team by developing a written constitution and seeking official recognition as a student organization at the University of Toronto. The vision is clear: the Student Ministry Team will serve as the heartbeat of ECUT’s ministry, guiding its growth and ensuring that future students continue to find a vibrant, welcoming, and inclusive faith community on campus.

In the words of one student leader: “This is a place where you’re not just a number. You’re known, you’re welcomed, and you’re loved. That’s the heart of this ministry—and we’re just getting started.”

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In May 2025, ECUT received a grant from the United Church of Canada Foundation Living Spirit Fund. This Seeds of Hope grant will provide paid internships to facilitate student leadership and community building in social justice, in the areas of eco-spirituality and queer Christian spirituality.

Walking Together in Faith

ECUT's First Annual Lenten Pilgrimage Celebrates the United Church Centennial

On a chilly Saturday in late March, thirty students, faculty, staff, and friends of the chaplaincy laced up their boots, bundled up against the wind and rain, and set out on a journey of faith and fellowship through the heart of downtown Toronto. This was the first-ever Lenten Pilgrimage hosted by the Ecumenical Chaplaincy—a day-long, prayerful walk to mark the Centennial Celebration of the United Church of Canada (UCC). It was a pilgrimage rooted in gratitude for the past, hope for the future, and a desire to deepen the connections between campus ministry and the wider church.

Pilgrims at College Street United Church

With each stop along the way—College Street United, Metropolitan United, St. Andrew's United, Bloor Street United, and finally Trinity-St. Paul United and Bathurst Street United—pilgrims were welcomed into the heart of these historic congregations. Each church opened its doors with hospitality and stories, sharing their unique histories, ministries, and dreams for the future. Pilgrims paused to listen, to sing, and to pray, reflecting on how these congregations have been anchors of faith in the city and imagining how they might continue to be places of spiritual life and community engagement in the years ahead.

Fellowship at Bathurst & Trinity St. Paul's United Churches

This pilgrimage was more than a walk through city streets. It was an invitation to pray with our feet, to witness the living history of the church, and to plant seeds of connection between the university community and the congregations who have faithfully supported campus ministry for so many years. It was also a fundraiser for ECUT's ongoing work, raising over $6,000 which will help to sustain our ministry and build bridges between students, faculty, staff, and the wider church for years to come.

A pause for lunch at Metropolitan United Church

We are deeply grateful to the six United Church congregations who welcomed us so warmly, to student leaders Peter Haresnape and Catherine Bergs who helped organize this year's pilgrimage, and to every pilgrim who joined us for this journey of faith, whether for an hour or the entire day. Your presence, prayers, and support made this pilgrimage a beautiful and hopeful expression of what it means to be the church in this time and place.