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Forsey Studies UU Past as Professor of Church History

Alicia McNary Forsey, Starr King School professor of church history, understands the importance of knowing the Unitarian Universalist past and how it informs the ability to move with integrity, both as individuals and as institutions.

Mindful of those marginalized in the movement, Forsey has concentrated her research and writing on this group, especially the women.

“I’m interested in the Radical Reformation and how it remains relevant to students and scholars,” she said. “Within that period, my primary focus is on the Anabaptists, who survive to this day in various denominations, including the Mennonites.”

With George Huntston Williams, Hollis professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, Forsey is writing “Women In the Radical Reformation.” This book, scheduled for completion early in 2001, will demonstrate that women were in many ways as active, well informed and committed as the movement’s men.

“Women reformers tended to cross over boundaries of class and dogma,” said Forsey, “while male reformers tended to draw lines between themselves and anyone with a different perspective.”

Investigations into the movement’s history, she said, help Unitarian Universalists understand their perceptions of the ministry, the way they organize churches and fellowships and why they’re committed to social justice.

This approach to discovery, according to SKSM President Rebecca Parker, prompted the board of trustees in spring of 1999 to appoint Forsey professor of church history, the first since Earl Morse Wilbur, who also served as the school’s president from 1904 to 1931.

“We saw a need to regain historical consciousness,” said Parker. “Our progressive, liberal tradition is always focused on the future. But the past is a place to remember and constantly reconnect.”

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New Development Team Aims to Expand Connections

A new Starr King School for the Ministry development team will lead efforts to boost the school’s donor base, improve communication with graduates and friends as well as increase public visibility of its mission and programs.

Rev. Kelly Flood, a 1990 graduate of SKSM, has been hired as director of development. Sara Schwartz Kendall has taken on the role of manager of development programs, and Cheryl Bowlan is the school’s new director of communications.

“Our goal,” said Rev. Flood, “is to celebrate and promote the school’s nearly one hundred-year tradition of generating grounded, prophetic religious leaders. We’ll stay in touch with our fine graduates, reach across the continent to seek support from old friends and welcome new friends into our midst.”

Rev. Flood lives in Lexington, Ky., where she served as senior minister from 1991 to 1998 at that city’s Unitarian Universalist church. There she oversaw a $1 million facilities expansion for her mid-size congregation and helped raise nearly $500,000 in a capital campaign.

Recently she formed her own fund-raising firm, based in Lexington, where she’ll operate as Starr King School’s development director.

Rev. Flood learned fund-raising fundamentals as an aide to a Florida state representative and as a student assistant to Alicia Forsey, SKSM’s former development director and current dean of faculty.

Sara Schwartz Kendall, Starr King School’s manager of development programs, has worked in business administration, social justice and community volunteering. A graduate of Vassar College, she also holds an M.A. in Sociology/Queer Studies from San Diego State University. Currently she’s studying for a master’s degree in liberal arts at Mills College and volunteers at the Harvey Milk Institute in San Francisco.

Cheryl Bowlan, the newly hired director of communications, is a writer trained at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism. She has

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SKSM Honors Transylvanian Grad With Scholars Program

It’s a long way from Homeroaszentpeter to Berkeley. This village in the Aranyos Valley of Transylvania is where Kinga-Reka Zsigmond, a second-generation Unitarian minister, serves a congregation of 200. But for this year she has settled into Starr King School for the Ministry as a Francis Balazs Scholar.

“I wanted to study the sociology of religion, and I heard that Clare Fischer (professor of religion and culture) is here,” said Kinga-Reka. “I talked to the other students who already have been here. They are very enthusiastic and told me to come.”

KINGA-REKA, 27, is the fifth Transylvanian to come to SKSM in the last six years and the first under the school’s new administration of the Francis Balazs Scholars Program. In the past, SKSM waived a year’s tuition while the Partner Church Council, the Fund for Unitarian Universalism, a Boston church, three Bay Area congregations and individual supporters raised money to pay for the living expenses of a student chosen by Kolozsvár, the Transylvanian seminary where Unitarian ministers are trained. Now SKSM will take a greater role in fund raising and administration and has renamed the program after a much loved 1927 Transylvanian graduate, Francis Balazs.

A poet, novelist, social reformer and Unitarian minister, Balazs (pronounced BALL-osh) returned to Transylvania after studying at SKSM. Choosing the small, poor village of Meszko for his ministry, he rebuilt its Unitarian church and established health and religion programs. He also led an effort to set up producer cooperatives aimed at providing villagers in seven communities along the Aranyos River with a growing, reliable income. Somehow this accomplished man even found time to write, becoming a leading literary figure in his homeland.

Balazs’ most important influence, however, was as a mentor and friend to students from the Kolozsvár seminary, located in a region of Transylvania where Unitarianism took root 500 years ago. Thanks to Balazs, students began traveling to Berkeley for study at SKSM, but that flow halted when World War II broke out.

More than half a century later, in 1994, a Kolozsvár student, the first of a revitalized relationship, came to Starr King School thanks to the efforts of the Pacific Central District and Bay Area congregations.

Now this renewed association between the long-established Unitarian traditions of Transylvania and the progressive Unitarian Universalist traditions of the American West needs financial support to remain intact.

“We have to raise $15,000 to $20,000 not only for Kinga-Reka this year,” said Arliss Ungar, a member of the scholarship coordinating committee, “but we’re asking for pledges for next year. We have to start getting things ready a year in advance.”

For Balazs Scholars, a year in America is both demanding and exciting. In addition to Kinga-Reka’s Starr King School studies, she has been speaking to UU congregations around the country and plans to address the General Assembly at the June meeting in Nashville. Her stay at SKSM, she said, has proven especially rewarding.

“I like the community of the school,” said Kinga-Reka. “I hope when we all finish our studies, we will stay in touch. We find so many similar things which are common despite different cultures, like honoring individuals, working for human rights and thinking about ways to build sustainable communities.”

In July, when Kinga-Reka returns to her congregation in Transylvania, she plans to launch several projects in the spirit of Francis Balazs, among them a new parsonage and a micro-credit union to help villagers create small industries such as a flour mill, bakery, dairy and pig farm.

“If we can offer economic development,” said Kinga-Reka, “young people won’t have to leave the village and the church will flourish.”

For more information about the Francis Balazs Scholars Program and opportunities to contribute, please contact SKSM Development Director Kelly Flood at revflood@aol.com.

My destiny is this: to be understood by a few, In the life of some to be a leaven, For many others to be a good. I carry, however, the seed of the future, not the present’s broken and bloody body.

Francis Balazs 1901-1937

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A slight, delicate man, Thomas Starr King told his new congregation at the San Francisco Unitarian Church, “When I’m mad, I weigh a ton.”
For the past couple of years, William Main (’85) has been touring the West by AMTRAK, revisiting stops from his own past and those of his ancestors. “I come from a long line of wanderers,” he said. He retired from the First Unitarian Universalist Parish in Derby Line, Vt., after 12 years in the ministry. Since then he has visited such cities as Austin, Denver, St. Louis and Monterey. While living in Monterey, he discovered in nearby Hollister the graves of his great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather, who came to California in the 1850s for the gold rush. These days William is staying with SKSM grad Penelope Binger in Grand Rapids, Iowa, but expects he’ll eventually settle down in the Pacific Northwest.

After a decade in other professions, including teaching anthropology to Japanese students and editing Woodworker’s Journal, Craig Moro (’82) has returned to the ministry. He now works half time for the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, Wash., and travels once a month to Bend, Ore., to serve the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon. “I feel a growing recognition that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing,” said Moro. His “most fulfilling” role, however, is “personal assistant” to his 2-year-old son, Saad Michael Moro.

Former SKSM assistant development director David Ryan (1993-97) stopped by the school in February to say hello. He has been living in Tabasco in southeast Mexico and working for SERPAJ, a human rights organization concerned with severe environmental contamination caused by the area’s state-owned oil refineries. David plans to stay in Mexico and study art.

SKSM’s board of trustees has begun a new process of theological study and reflection to determine the school’s future over the next five years and establish a set of goals. The committee in charge of this task is chaired by Elias Farajajé-Jones, professor of cultural studies, and Roy Phillips, an Ohio UU minister, and includes President Rebecca Parker, Rosemary Bray McNatt, chair of SKSM’s board of trustees, as well as two students, John Stanger and Dana Worsnop, student body president.

Rebecca Parker headed for Manhattan in March to preach the ordination sermon for Rosemary Bray McNatt. (Congratulations, Rosemary!) Rebecca then traveled to Boston for meetings of the Panel on Theological Education and on to Washington, D.C., for a conference on the Public Vocation of Theological Schools.

Starr King On the Road was launched last spring under the coordination of Cecilia Kingman Miller, then a first-year student. In all, 15 students and Vielbonz, associate professor of ministry, visited congregations in Portland, Ore., and throughout California, which were then able to experience SKSM’s educational process and support its mission. Sara Schwartz Kendall, the school’s manager of development programs, has since taken on coordination duties and is finalizing plans for another set of students to “hit the road” next year.
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with the present. We’re interested in fostering a creative relationship between the present and the past, and this is what Alicia has been helping us do.”

Forsey forged an important historical link when she instituted and led the Earl Morse Wilbur Project that made available to students and scholars a collection of 1,300 rare books in eight languages donated by the school’s first president.

Forsey had graduated from Starr King School never knowing about the collection in the basement and was stunned to discover it when she returned in 1987 as a staff member.

“After I graduated,” she said, “I had a difficult time answering the question: Why does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist or what does a Unitarian Universalist believe? I usually answered by saying what we don’t believe, dropped a few famous names and felt embarrassed by that inadequate response. When I returned to the school, I learned about the collection and went to visit the books. The overall effect was overwhelming. I quickly became hooked on history.”

Forsey later followed her passion and entered a doctoral program while continuing to work at Starr King. She then dove into the Earl Morse Wilbur Project. On her own time over two years she raised money from an Adopt-A-Book program to repair and rebind volumes dating back to 1522, arranged for an English synopsis of every Latin volume, found a talented archivist to donate his skills and generated support for a reading room renovation.

Now valuable texts nestle line shelves in the school’s rare book room, all catalogued and accessible through computers and a staff librarian.

Since her faculty appointment a year ago, Forsey has introduced these scholarly resources to SKSM students in her history classes. Eventually, when her position as dean of faculty rotates to another faculty member, she hopes to turn her attention full time to the history of the Unitarian Universalist movement and its people.

Phone Bank Set for Annual Dial-a-Grad Fundraiser

Starr King School for the Ministry students will soon ring up graduates for the annual Phone-a-thon scheduled for April 11, 13 and 15.

“It’s a time when we check in with grads and bring them up-to-date about what’s happening at the school,” said Sara Schwartz Kendall, coordinator of the event. “It’s also a nice opportunity for students going through the program to talk with grads in the field.”

All funds raised from the Phone-a-thon will go directly to Starr King School scholarships.

Teams of student volunteers will call a long list of SKSM graduates between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. (Pacific Time) on Tuesday, April 11 and Thursday, April 13. On Saturday, April 15, volunteers will call between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. (Pacific Time).

For those who’ve changed an address or phone number, this is a good time to let the school know. Email updates to Schwartz Kendall at skconsult@earthlink.net.

“We all look forward to catching up with our grads and helping support students here at Starr King School,” said Schwartz Kendall.

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worked in public relations and journalism since 1982. Bowlan served as the manager of creative services for the California headquarters of the American Cancer Society and has written for magazines and newspapers on a variety of topics, including business, parenting, the Internet and children’s literature.

“At Starr King,” said President Rebecca Parker, “we’re looking forward to ways in which the skills and creativity of this team will foster our valued relationships with friends and supporters. We see this team strengthening our development, communication and student recruitment work.”

Abraham Lincoln believed it was Reverend Thomas Starr King alone who kept California within the Union during the difficult days of the Civil War.