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AST CONNECT

Where Theology Connects with the World.

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Message from the President

I love the season of Advent, the season of hope.

With all that's going on in the world around us and with the decline in numbers and money in so many of our churches, hope can be hard.

On the other hand, despair is easy. Despair doesn't ask anything of us – when we despair, we just sit back and wait for the worst to come.

But when we hope?

When we hope, we act. When we hope, we work. When we hope, we try.

As Anne Lamott said, “Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: You don't give up.”

Atlantic School of Theology is a sign of hope. The stories of our students, our alumni, our staff and faculty, and volunteers, all of these are stories of people of hope seeking to live out their callings to make the world better. To wait and watch and work. To not give up.

As you enjoy their stories in this issue of *AST Connect*, may you also be renewed in hope in this season of Light shining in the darkness.

The Rev. Dr. Heather McCance
President, Atlantic School of Theology



Message from the Academic Dean

The season of Advent and the conclusion of the fall term merge in these first two weeks of December. I love the traditional themes of Advent for each Sunday in the season.

I have no doubt that most of us are living in **Hope** that we can get through the papers that still need to be written or graded, the sermons that need to be preached, the pastoral visits that need to be done, not to mention the preparations on the home front for the holidays. No matter if you are a student, staff, faculty, or alum, December is a busy time. I know I am looking forward to the university being closed for two weeks so that I can enjoy time with family and friends.

In the season of Advent, **Peace** follows Hope. I know for many in our community, the fall has been filled with illness and anxiety, and the world feels anything but peaceful. My prayer is that you may find moments of peace, no matter what is happening in your life ... the peace that only God can give. **Joy** follows Peace, and **Love** follows Joy. May those be yours as well in this season, when the ever-growing darkness slowly turns back towards the light.

With best wishes now and for a Happy New Year.

The Rev. Dr. Susan MacAlpine-Gillis
Academic Dean, Atlantic School of Theology





AST alum weaves Cape Breton and Polish tradition into new children's book

AST alum, Dr. Tom Urbaniak, together with illustrator Tammy Krasniqi, have just released another children's book, titled, *"Oliver's Polish Christmas: A Cape Breton Story"*. The author's royalties are going toward the St. Michael's Polish Benefit Society.

Urbaniak is a Professor of Political Science at Cape Breton University and is the husband of the late Rev. Alison Etter. He serves on AST's Rev. Alison Etter Memorial Fund committee. His previous book, *"You Are Loved,"* was a tribute to his late wife. Royalties from that book go toward the Rev. Alison Etter Memorial Fund.

What inspired you to blend the distinct Polish Christmas traditions with the unique community setting of Cape Breton for Oliver's story?

In short, that beautiful blend exists already! Cape Breton has one of Canada's oldest Polish communities – including the only Polish church and hall in Atlantic Canada. Cape Breton's "Polonia" is a small but vibrant, warm, and hospitable community that has kept Polish traditions, grassroots spirituality, songs and the language alive for generations. My son, Oliver (known by his Polish diminutive "Oluszek" in Cape Breton's Polish community) is blessed to be part of such a community.

"Oliver's Polish Christmas" is dedicated to your late parents, Joseph and Irene. How does their memory or personal history inform the themes or feelings conveyed in this book?

My parents both passed away in 2024, shortly after my wife, Alison (Rev. Alison Etter, AST graduate), passed away. Oliver was just two years old. In the book, Oliver is shown visiting his "babcia" and "dziadzia". They tell him they are looking forward to Christmas – but Oliver thought his grandparents said they are looking "for" Christmas. And so the story takes the reader through various events and activities that you would actually see during the Christmas season, with Oliver asking members of the community where Christmas is. He receives a somewhat different, but endearing answer, to his question each time. It all gets resolved in the end!

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My parents cherished and shared many Polish customs with me — including Christmas customs with deep spiritual meaning. We would set an extra plate on Wigilia (Christmas Eve), representing Christ but also representing our openness to welcome a stranger who might need our help and friendship. We would exchange blessings with the Oplatek Christmas wafer. The Christmas season would start (not end!) on December 24 and continue until the Feast Day of Matka Boza Gromniczna — Our Lady of the Thunder Candle — on Candlemas Day (February 2). In between, we would mark a number of special holidays and holy days. We would gather with others for a Jaselka folk Christmas pageant, as Oliver and I do now. In fact, the folk rocking horse for the Jaselka, shown in the book, actually exists; it's part of a children's mini-museum in the Polish Village Hall. And Oliver, who will turn four in February, has used it in the Jaselka pageant.

As an AST alum and a member of the Rev. Alison Etter Fund committee, how do you see your commitment to community, reflected in the book, connecting with your involvement at the college?

My previous books have been either for academic audiences or for audiences interested in public affairs and community development. I never imagined writing children's books. Bereavement — and a kind of journey of spiritual healing -- led me to write “You Are Loved” in memory of my wife, Alison (released in December 2024) and now “Oliver's Polish Christmas,” dedicated to the memory of my parents. These two children's books have been a way of expressing heartfelt gratitude to Alison and my parents — and gratitude as well to the beautiful communities that surround us and have helped us get through difficult times.

Neither project would have been possible without the patience, perseverance and talent of illustrator Tammy Krasniqi. Tammy is a digital illustrator who takes this art form very seriously — and there was a lot of back and forth in the process. I was introduced to Tammy by Alison's congregants in Glace Bay (Alison was the United Church minister in Glace Bay). Tammy is originally from Glace Bay and now lives in Halifax — and she has illustrated other books as well.

“Oliver's Polish Christmas” and “You Are Loved” are available through online booksellers or by contacting Urbaniak. Email: tom_urbaniak@cbu.ca



AST student Glenn Keefe creates a new kind of Faith Circle

Glenn Keefe is a B.Th. student at AST. Originally from Twillingate, N.L., Keefe now resides in Oshawa, O.N. with his partner, Mark, and their two cats, Winston and Charles.

After more than 20 years of service in the Royal Canadian Dental Corps, Keefe decided to answer his call to ministry and that's what brought him to AST. Keefe is also the Secretary of the AST Student Union.

Faith Circle is a ministry that Keefe founded. The members meet on the last Sunday of the month from 2-4 p.m. at Club 717 in Oshawa.

What is the core idea or mission behind Faith Circle?

At the beginning of 2025, I was approached by the President of the Durham Alliance Outreach program and Club 717 (a local 2SLGBTQIA+ nightclub) to see if there would be any interest in starting a spiritual group. The purpose of the group was to reach those of the queer community who had a spiritual life but did not want to attend a physical church due to the stigma surrounding the church and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

I took that information and sat on it for about a month, mulling over what I could offer to this group, so we decided to have a gathering in May of 2025 at Club 717 to see if there was an interest from the community.

On 25 May 2025 at 2 p.m., I went to the club, not knowing if anyone would be interested in being part of this group. God moves most wonderfully. We had six people, small but mighty, and we spent time together in fellowship.

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The information that I gathered was this:

- The community wanted to have worship outside of the physical church building because of the church's condemnation of the community for so many years.
- The community is looking for spiritual acceptance of who they are as human beings, to seek God and feel loved by God.
- The community is craving meaningful gatherings to offer worship, prayer, and reflection.
- The community asked for scripture-based knowledge to show how 2SLGBTQIA+ people are not excluded from society, and that due to a mistranslation in the Bible, the Christian Nationalist propaganda has used this as a sacred weapon towards this marginalized group.
- The most essential aspect that the community asked for was the space to be themselves, and to worship freely and openly as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and to talk openly as faithful people of God.

How is the experience of “Faith Circle” different from a standard formal worship setting?

This group meets at a bar, which is the furthest thing from a worship setting. The idea is to offer a safe space from judgment and old-school rhetoric, a space where anyone who attends is met with love, compassion, and complete acceptance of who they are in God's world.

We don't have a piano or keyboard for music; we use the sound system. We don't have pews; instead, we have tables and chairs that can be arranged in a circle of welcome, and we don't have any religious icons, such as a cross or altar. We have a small circular table that holds a candle, and we have people who come to share and to listen. We have people who have questions and seek answers to those questions. We have community support from other clergy who are willing to come and speak to our group about concerns of how the church has treated the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the past. Although it is not a traditional sanctuary, we have a sanctuary; it is the community that gathers to express their faith in an open and safe space.

How can people join or participate, and what is the best way to contact the group?

Currently, this faith circle is only offered in an in-person format; however, that does not mean we will not expand to an online presence. We are still growing and finding our way along this path.

The best way to contact us is through email: glenn.keefe@astheology.ns.ca or gkeefe78@gmail.com.



AST's Dr. Wing Yi Wong launches Canada's first Cantonese program rooted in inclusive liberation theology

AST's Dr. Wing Yi Wong, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Acting Coordinator of Contextual Education including the Summer Distance Program, also teaches at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto where she offers courses in worship and interfaith ritual.

Dr. Wong recently launched a Cantonese continuing education program at Emmanuel College – the first of its kind in Canada, rooted in liberation theology and designed for diaspora communities exploring faith amid trauma. The program is supported by the United Church of Canada Foundation.

This continuing education program is the first of its kind in Canada, introducing inclusive theological traditions to the Cantonese diaspora. What gap in theological education were you specifically aiming to fill with this program?

Most existing programs available to Cantonese-speaking communities in Canada lean toward conservative traditions. We wanted to offer something different – a space grounded in inclusive theology where people could explore faith that speaks to their culture, language, and lived experience. It's the first program of its kind in Canada, designed especially for those navigating migration, identity, and spiritual renewal through a lens of diaspora, justice, and belonging.

You offer courses on worship and interfaith ritual at Emmanuel College. In what ways do you encourage AST students to think creatively or expansively about worship beyond their own denominational traditions?

I encourage students to approach worship with deep curiosity, humble listening, and creative imagination. Through interfaith exploration and collaborative practice, we might come to see that worship can be grounded in traditions while being boldly open to new expressions.

Is there a piece of advice you would offer an AST student today who is trying to discern how their theological studies can effectively address social justice and cultural identity in their future ministry?

Start with your own story. Your questions, your roots, your experience – they matter. Let them guide your learning and shape a ministry that's true to who you are and the world you're serving



AST awarded \$2.5 million USD Lilly Endowment grant to launch Canada-wide Ecumenical Shared Ministries Training Program

Atlantic School of Theology (AST) has received a grant of \$2.5 million USD from Lilly Endowment Inc. to help establish its Ecumenical Shared Ministries Training Program (ESMTP). ESMTP will operate with a combination of local resources housed with the collaborating partners and online teaching that uses the resources of AST.

AST is working with St. John's College in Winnipeg, the Prairie Centre for Ecumenism in Saskatoon, St. Paul's University in Ottawa, Henry Budd College for Ministry in The Pas, M.B., and the Canadian Council of Churches on a project that will develop curriculum and training for lay and ordained leaders in Ecumenical Shared Ministries.

The project is being funded through Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. This initiative is designed to help theological schools across the United States and Canada as they prioritize and respond to the most pressing challenges they face as they prepare pastoral leaders for Christian congregations both now and into the future. The grant to AST is one of 45 that was approved in this competitive round of funding to support theological schools as they lead large-scale collaborations with other seminaries, colleges and universities, and other church-related organizations.

ESMTP will provide resources to train and equip those preparing for ordained ministry, lay congregational leaders, and those who have served as pastoral leaders for some time in their own distinct traditions. It would allow the limited resources of each of the collaborating organizations to come together to be more than the sum of their parts, giving learners access to innovative scholarship, practical skills, and a network of practitioners and mentors to empower them to live into this vibrant model of local ministry.

"We are enthusiastic about the opportunities this grant provides to advance ecumenical ministry across Canada through innovative education and training," shared The Rev. Dr. Heather McCance, President of Atlantic School of Theology.

"We deeply appreciate the visionary support of the Lilly Endowment in advancing theological education for pastoral leaders, and look forward to collaborating with our partners to enhance AST's capacity in this vital work."

Read more at www.asttheology.ns.ca/news

Winter 2026 Continuing Education at AST

Have you checked out what we have on offer for Winter 2026 Continuing Education at AST? Visit our website www.astheology.ns and select Continuing Education under the Students tab to learn more.

Family Ministry

Instructor: The Rev.

Dr. David Csinos

This course develops knowledge and skills for thoughtful, creative engagement in ministry with families in contemporary society. It will focus on developing biblical and theological foundations for understanding families, identifying current issues related to family development and dynamics, and engaging in pastoral practices that help form faith among families.



ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Csinos earned a PhD in practical theology (University of St. Michael's College, Toronto); a ThM in Christian education (Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond); an MTS in Christian ministry (McMaster University, Hamilton), and a BA in religion and culture (Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo). He researches, teaches, and writes widely about faith formation, homiletics, children's and youth ministry, intergenerational ministry, and culture.

Dates: January 5 - April 7, 2026

Fee: \$275

Dying, Death and Grief

Instructor: The Rev. Canon

Dr. Jody Clarke

This course will focus on how people live with the many realities that surround dying, death, and bereavement.

First and foremost, this is a course about living. It is about how people respond to life-altering circumstances. At its core, this course will focus on how people live with the many realities that surround dying, death, and bereavement.



ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Clarke earned a BA (Dalhousie); an MDiv (Trinity College, Toronto); and a DMin (St. Stephen's College, Edmonton). His specializations include pastoral psychotherapy, death and dying, trauma and trauma recovery, guilt, forgiveness, and peace. He teaches courses in these areas, as well as sexuality, congregational dynamics and development, leadership, personality theory, sports and religion, and individual and community resilience. He is a certified trainer and supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education supervisors.

Dates: January 13 - April 7, 2026

Fee: \$600

Psalms and Interpretations

Instructor: Dr. Daniel Driver

A major goal of this course is to see how select psalms have fed and informed Jewish and Christian theology in various periods: biblical times, Rabbinic and Patristic periods, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and down to modern times. To help understand the anthology's arrangement, the course will also interact with recent scholarship on the shape and shaping of the Psalter.



ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Driver earned a PhD in Divinity (St. Mary's College, University of St. Andrews, 2009), where he studied Old Testament, and a BA in English Literature (Wheaton College, 2002). Dr. Driver joined the faculty of AST in 2016 and was promoted to Professor in 2021. Dr. Driver presently enjoys serving church and academy in Atlantic Canada, in a broadly and self-consciously ecumenical environment.

Dates: January 12 - April 13, 2026

Fee: \$275

Hayes Symposium

Faithful Presence: Pastoral Ministry in the Context of MAiD

This two-day workshop will increase participant awareness of patient, family, and healthcare worker perspectives and build skills for coming alongside pastorally. The understanding of Scripture, theology, and denominational positions on MAiD will be considered as one develops a pastoral position for response. Of particular interest to denominational leaders and those who counsel pastoral caregivers will be the lessons on Postvention Care and the information on how to support ministering individuals impacted by a person's decision for MAiD.



About the presenter: Dr. Gloria Woodland is the Director of the Centre for Education & Advancement of Spiritual Care and Associate Professor of Chaplaincy Studies & Spiritual Care at MB Seminary.

Gloria has a passion for the ministry of spiritual care. She believes that the ministry of Christian chaplains is to reveal that God is present in the varied circumstances of life, yet even more to share that God is not just present, but that he is active.

Date: May 13 & 14, 2026, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Cost: Early bird \$175 | Regular \$225 | Student \$125

Location: AST Chapel

More details: Email Lydia.Hood@asttheology.ns.ca

Register here



Navigating and surviving eldercare

How do we respond to the needs of parents, grandparents, neighbours, and parishioners as they age? What do they need in terms of support and advocacy, and how best do you respond? What is the role of family members and faith communities? This workshop will consider these and related questions with Patrick Cassidy.



About the presenter: Patrick Cassidy, KC, is a partner in the law firm of Cox & Palmer in Halifax and has specialized in the area of Condominium Law since 1982. He acts for most of the condominium corporations in Nova Scotia as well as developers of condominium and fractional projects throughout Atlantic Canada. A Past Chair of CCI National and the CCI-NS Chapter, he is a frequent writer for various publications and a lecturer and teacher for several institutions across Canada and the United States.

Date: March 3, 2026, 1:30 p.m.

Cost: \$25 | Free for students

Location: AST Chapel | Zoom

More details: Email Lydia.Hood@asttheology.ns.ca

Register here



November in pictures

A brief photo series featuring AST events and special moments from last month.



- 1. November 4 & 5** - 2025 Nicholson Lecture Series featuring Dr. Sarah Han of Tyndale University
- 2. November 6** - Community Thursday Lunch with Samantha Miller from the 2025 United Church of Canada's Indigenous-Racialized Youth Scholars program
- 3. November 13** - Community Thursday Service with The Rev. Dr. David Csinos
- 4. November 13** - Dr. Alyda Faber read from her work-in-progress, "Kjipuktuk Psalms" for Community Thursday Lunch.
- 5. November 19** - Laura and Randy Scott, Music Directors from Pictou United Church, at AST campus
- 6. November 20** - Dr. Alyda Faber guided the community through a meditation on Psalm 129 for Community Thursday Service.
- 7. November 20** - Rev. Naomi Miller joined us via Zoom to speak about a theology of food and embodiment that runs counter to the "diet culture".
- 8. November 23** - The Rev. Canon Dr. Jody Clarke at the morning service and Lunch and Learn of St. Luke's Anglican Church in Dartmouth
- 9. November 27** - The AST community gathered together to wish Dr. David Deane well as he leaves to teach in Edmonton.

AST Connect is our monthly newsletter dedicated to reviving relationships, celebrating alumni impact and student stories, and keeping you linked to the heart of the AST community. Do you have news or suggestions for the newsletter? We would love to hear from you!
Email: astcommunications@asttheology.ns.ca