

BU School of Theology hosts inaugural New Wineskins Conference for contextual education supervisors

By E. MAY HARTNESS

Community, religious, and nonprofit leaders from across New England gathered on Boston University's campus on March 24 for the inaugural BU School of Theology (STH) New Wineskins Conference, where the theme was "Remembering Resilience." The event, supported by a Lilly Endowment Inc. Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative grant, brought together leaders to explore how faith communities can build resilience, respond to trauma, and sustain leadership amid rapid social and institutional change.

Structured as a daylong gathering that began with a keynote lecture and concluded with two workshop sessions, the New Wineskins Conference created space for leaders to engage emerging research, learn from peers across sectors, and reflect on strategies for guiding communities through periods of uncertainty and change.

"It was a day apart for supervisors, one in which they didn't have to be leaders but could instead be the recipients of the gracious hospitality they so often extend to others," said STH Contextual Education Director Anastasia Kidd.

The Office of Contextual Education hosted the conference on Boston University's Fenway campus. The conference brought together practitioners and scholars from across the region through keynote presentations and workshops focused on leadership,



congregational resilience, trauma response, and community care. Writer, sociologist of religion, and producer Lynne Gerber delivered the keynote presentation, "Ministering in Impossible Times."

A narrative beacon for ministry leaders

Drawing on the experience of Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, Gerber explored how leaders accompany communities through prolonged uncertainty, grief, and disruption. Using examples from her research and podcast *When We All Get to Heaven*, she highlighted ways faith communities can help people name difficult realities, imagine new possibilities, and sustain one another during periods of crisis.

Gerber said that the story of MCC SF and its leadership could serve as a narrative beacon for ministry leaders of today, one that illuminates the significance and "miracle" of accompaniment alongside congregants navigating moments of collective crisis. Detailing how MCC SF

supported its members during what the church now calls “the AIDS years,” Gerber urged conference participants to “step into the impossibility [of their own ministerial work], name as much of what’s happening ... as possible, use all symbolic and material tools at hand to imagine other possibilities, and try to live into those other possibilities, as much as you can, for as long as you can. Or for as long as it takes.”

Gerber provided opportunities for tablemates to discuss their reactions to the material. In response, one participant noted how it takes “one million points of courage” to journey with a congregation through what seems to be an impossible moment. Others connected the historical case study to challenges facing their own organizations and communities. Discussions focused on how leaders can build trust, support people through uncertainty, and respond to the effects of institutional and policy changes on the communities they serve.

Importance of trauma understanding and response

This conversation segued into the first workshop session: Trauma-Responsive Congregations (TRC), a project supported by Lilly Endowment Inc. and led by Boston University professors Shelly Rambo, Eunil David Cho, and Eric Brown. Based on research gathered through their work with the first TRC group, a six-congregation cohort located in the Greater Boston area, Rambo and Brown relayed the importance of helping congregants “metabolize their pain” by providing “relational homes in which pain can be held.” Echoing Gerber’s emphasis on the miracle of accompaniment in face of “impossible times,” this workshop recognized ministers as the experts in their own congregational settings while also encouraging deeper understandings of and responses to various trauma types. The leaders of the TRC project argued that such understandings not only enrich experiences of community care, but also clergy self-care.

“I loved the connections between the people in the room, the wisdom in our theologies and ancestries of our stories, the brilliant alignment of MCC SF and the work being done in trauma informed congregations!” one participant stated in their conference feedback.

The conference concluded with a reflective workshop led by Kidd. Gathered around a large wooden table in a sunlit room, participants engaged in creative exercises and conversation as they processed the day’s themes of resilience, leadership, and community care. The session provided space to reflect on new insights and consider how they might be applied in participants’ own ministry and community contexts.

“I was struck by the care with which this gathering created space for reflection, connection, and renewal,” said Lysette Flores, associate director of initiatives at ATS. “The conversations throughout the day reminded me how much wisdom already lives within communities of practice, and how meaningful it can be when leaders have opportunities to learn from one another, share challenges, and reflect together on the realities facing their communities.”

The conference recognized the important role contextual education supervisors play in theological education, helping students connect classroom learning with the practical challenges of leadership, care, and service.

“This is the work we want to do—not only strengthen our network of faith leaders in and around Boston, but create events that speak directly to the present-day needs of clergy,” said Kidd. “We couldn’t do what we do without our contextual education supervisors, and we honor them by providing a space where they might come together, share their experiences, and remember that they are not in this alone.”

The BU STH Office of Contextual Education will host the second annual New Wineskins Conference on April 9, 2027.



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