

# National Association of Congregational Christian Churches Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies Dean's Annual Report 2021

In the gospel of John 15:1-8, Jesus, in the midst of his earthly farewell discourse to his disciples, invites them to imagine a vine grower, a vine, and branches on the vine: *I am the vine, you are the branches*. The branches are to remain, or abide, in the vine, so that they might “bear much fruit,” as Jesus indicates that this is what is required to, “become my disciples.” The Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies (CFTS) is, in its grounding in Jesus’ educational ministry, a vine of sorts that seeks to sustain and give life to the churches of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. The hope is that the students, the branches, will remain close and “abide” in the Congregational Way that CFTS nurtures. Years of course work and learning at an accredited seminary approved by CFTS toward the earning of a Master of Divinity (M. Div.) degree, a supervised ministry experience, an intensive class in Congregational history and polity held in Boston, research in topics related to Congregational identity and practice, attendance at Annual Meetings and Conferences, Ministers’ Convocations, and Congregational Symposia, and the opportunities to connect with other clergy, students, and members of NACCC churches all serve to make the branches on the vine healthy and vital.

Over the decades that the CFTS program has been in existence to assist with the academic, financial, and spiritual aspects of receiving a quality seminary education, its graduates have extended the vine of Congregational faith and practice far and wide. Though the following list is not exclusive, CFTS graduates have, in the last year:

- Given faithful ministry to churches among the NACCC
- Aided the NACCC in volunteer capacities, even as Moderator and on Ministry Councils, boards, and committees
- Contributed time and wisdom to the Executive Director Search Committee
- Worked as staff members of the NACCC
- Been critical to planning events for the International Congregational Fellowship
- Taken active roles in the Congregational Retreat Society and the Washington Gladden Society
- Continued guiding the efforts of the Congregational Library and Archives on its Board of Directors
- Let their voices be heard through community, ecumenical, and interfaith initiatives
- Done much, much more...

Two new students have been admitted into CFTS Fellowship: Thomas Rockwell, member of the First Congregational Church, St. Johns, Michigan, attending the Earlham School of Theology in Indiana, and Sarah Fuller, member of the First Congregational Church of Hanson, Massachusetts, pursuing her degree at the Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. They join Amory Jewett and Jacob Richards, both in Michigan and enrolled at the Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Inquiries are regularly made about the benefits of CFTS for students who apply.

Our students have, in the last year, faced the challenges we all have endured through this unusual season of COVID-19. They, along with the schools from which they receive their education, have had to adapt and pivot to new models of learning. Still, they have not only managed to move forward in their goals, but have taken advantage of online offerings, as well, such as regional association meetings and the virtual Ministers’ Convocation, even though these were not requirements for graduation. The branches have spread in many directions!

The growth of these branches, these students, and the vine, Congregationalism itself, is dependent upon the gracious and generous support from member churches and individuals. By recommending people of any and all ages who have gifts for ministry to consider a CFTS education, new branches are formed and the vine is rejuvenated. The several scholarships made possible through donations by whole congregations, groups, and church members enable our students to receive exceptional training to become ministers of our NACCC faith communities upon graduation. When churches further give intentional consideration to CFTS graduates as candidates to serve in open ministry positions or when congregations and clergy agree to participate as Pilgrim Partner mentors or as supervising pastors for students’ practical on-site education, the vine is indeed strengthened. To find out more about these ways of nourishing Congregationalism for the present and future through CFTS, please call via phone (1-800-262-1620, extension 1613) or email [drcapacker@gmail.com](mailto:drcapacker@gmail.com). As Dean, I work with a wonderful group that tends to the well-being of the vine of the Congregational Way as the CFTS Committee: the Rev. Tom Van Tassell, Chairperson, the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Bingham, and the Revs. Mike Fales, Doug Gray, William Lange, Phyllis Merritt, and Justin Nierer. We welcome the Rev. Jacob Poindexter of the First Congregational Church of Anchorage, Alaska, to the Committee. Thanks to all for generating good fruit!

With you in tending to the vine of Congregationalism and providing for the expansion of its branches,  
Rev. Dr. Charles A. Packer, Dean, Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies