

ANNUAL REPORT

2022-2023





**SINCE 1959, SAINT PAUL
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
HAS EDUCATED LEADERS
WHO RENEW THE CHURCH
AND TRANSFORM THE
WORLD.**

OUR MISSION

Centered in Christ and rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, Saint Paul School of Theology is a seminary of intentional relationships committed to the formation of people for innovative, creative ministry through rigorous academic life; the exploration of Scripture, tradition, ministry practices; and diverse, contextual experience.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

The Reverend Neil B. Blair '80



Dear Friends and Alumni of Saint Paul:

Grace and peace be unto you!

I hope this letter finds you in good health and high spirits. As the President of Saint Paul School of Theology, I am delighted to extend my heartfelt gratitude for your unwavering support and commitment to our institution throughout the last year. Your generosity has played a pivotal role in ensuring the success of our endeavors, and I am eager to provide you with a recap of the significant milestones we have achieved, all made possible because of your invaluable contributions.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to all of you who generously helped Saint Paul meet and surpass our fundraising goals for the fiscal year ending on June 30, 2023. Your donations to the Seminary Fund, fellowships, endowments, and scholarships have directly benefited our students, allowing us to continue awarding a fifty percent tuition scholarship to every enrolled student. Your support has been the foundation of this crucial financial aid

program, and we could not have accomplished this without your dedication.

In addition to exceeding our fundraising targets, your enthusiastic response to the Mel and Mona Winger \$100,000 Seminary Fund Challenge Match further exemplifies your dedication to our mission. Thanks to your overwhelming support, we not only met the challenge but also qualified for every dollar of the match. This has significantly bolstered our financial position, allowing us to continue enriching the lives of our students and expanding our offerings.

I am thrilled to share that Saint Paul School of Theology remains financially sound, operating with a balanced budget and no debt. Our endowment, now 9-10 times the size of our annual expenses, provides us with a stable foundation for the future. Your donations have been instrumental in enabling us to make critical technological advancements, provide scholarships, and develop innovative academic programs, ensuring that our students receive a world-class education that empowers them for a lifetime of service.

Over the past year, we have taken great strides in enhancing our educational

delivery model. With significant technological investments, we have maintained a hybrid educational approach, accommodating the diverse needs of our students and offering a flexible working arrangement to support their growth and development.

One of our key focuses has been on sustainability, and I am pleased to inform you that we have achieved our goal in this area. Investments in our future have unlocked exciting new opportunities for our students, staff, and faculty, positioning Saint Paul as a beacon of excellence in theological education.

As we continue to grow, we are constantly adapting to meet the needs of our students and the evolving landscape of ministry. Our faculty and staff have worked tirelessly to integrate meaningful changes into our daily lives, fostering an inclusive and sacred

atmosphere where all are welcome to participate, regardless of location. Our weekly chapel services, combining in-person and online participation, are a testament to the sense of community we strive to create at Saint Paul.

Enrollment has remained robust, with nearly 30 new students joining us for the 2022-23 academic year. Our Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree program, particularly, has seen promising growth on our Oklahoma campus. With the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, prospective students have returned for in-person visits on both campuses, experiencing the vibrant community life that defines Saint Paul School of Theology.

Throughout the year, we have concentrated on strengthening the Master of Arts in Christian Ministry program, introducing two specializations: Women, Society, and Church; and Social Justice and Advocacy. These new specializations and the existing ones enable students to tailor their education to their unique passions and callings.

Our dedicated faculty members have continued to contribute significantly to the academy, church, and society. I am proud to

share some of their noteworthy achievements:

Rev. Dr. Sharon Betsworth co-authored a compelling journal article on “Discovering the Girls of the Bible through Childist Analysis” and has been a driving force in our academic community.

Dr. Casey Sigmon, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship, delivered a captivating keynote speech and published insightful works on Eucharist and liturgical authority.

Dr. Joshua Bartholomew, Assistant Professor of Ethics, Church, and Society, led essential discussions on race, liberation, and economics, sparking meaningful dialogue within the community.

Dr. Amy Oden, Adjunct Professor of Early Church History and Spirituality, made notable appearances as a guest speaker at events nationwide, sharing her expertise and inspiring countless individuals.

In light of the ongoing growth and expansion at Saint Paul School of Theology, I am delighted to announce the addition of two new esteemed faculty members, Rev. Dr. Heesung Hwang, Assistant Professor of Christian Religious Education, and Dr. Jacob Randolph, Assistant Professor of History of Christianity, effective July 1, 2023. Their impressive backgrounds and expertise



will undoubtedly contribute to our mission of fostering transformational education and empowering future ministry leaders.

Our commitment to excellence extends to every aspect of our institution, including accreditation and governance. Last year, we hosted a review team from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) as part of our regular reaffirmation cycle. We are delighted to report that the HLC

has continued the accreditation of Saint Paul School of Theology, reaffirming our standing as a distinguished institution of theological education. Additionally, our Board of Trustees has invested considerable effort in improving its governance capacity, ensuring we are well-equipped to lead Saint Paul into the future with wisdom and effectiveness.

In our continuous pursuit of excellence, we have forged a strong partnership with Zoom and Neat to enhance our educational capabilities. Implementing Neat's latest product, the Neat Bar Pros, in our large classrooms has significantly improved students'



President-Elect Jay Simmons, Ph.D.

and faculty's video and audio experience. This groundbreaking technology has empowered us to provide a dynamic and immersive learning environment, benefiting everyone in our community.

We are immensely grateful for your support in enabling our hybrid Commencement ceremony, where we celebrated the achievements of our graduating students

from both campuses via Zoom. The presence of distinguished alumna Bishop Delores J. Williamston of the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church made this momentous occasion even more special. Her inspiring keynote address and receipt of the 2023 Distinguished Graduate Award exemplified the transformational impact of a Saint Paul education.

Lastly, in response to my announcement that I will retire on December 31, 2023, Dr. Hogan appointed a search committee composed of faculty, staff, students, and trustees charged with identifying Saint Paul's next president. The Board of Trustees is pleased

to announce the appointment of Dr. Jay Simmons as the new president, effective January 2, 2024. The board finds Dr. Simmons to have the depth of strategic planning, accreditation acumen, and capital campaign leadership necessary to move Saint Paul into its next phase. Dr. Jay Simmons currently serves as Vice President for Institutional Advancement at Saint Paul School of Theology. In that capacity, he oversees marketing, recruiting, communications, and fundraising for Saint Paul.

Once again, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks for your unwavering commitment to Saint Paul School of Theology. Your partnership in ministry and steadfast support ensure that the next generation of clergy and lay leaders are well-equipped to respond to their calling and serve faithfully. Together, we are building a brighter future for our students, communities, and the world.

In the spirit of gratitude and with deep appreciation, I remain,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Neil Blair". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Rev. Neil B. Blair '80
President, Saint Paul School of Theology

SHIFTING SEASONS: Living Gracefully in Changing Times

The Saint Paul Student Council chose *Shifting Seasons: Living Gracefully in Changing Times* as its 2022-23 theme. What a deserving and poignant concentration as we are experiencing the rapid reshaping of church and societal landscapes!

Saint Paul has had its own transitional times since its founding in 1958. In celebrating over six decades of graduations, the seminary, and its alums have consistently been called by the Divine to new seasons to love and transform the world. These seasons have brought change, yet, they all have been moored in the constant, unwavering mission of theological education and God's love.

This year, two alumni clergy couples, Rev. John Lurvey, Jr. (MDiv'67) and Rev. Gwen Jones-Lurvey (MDiv'68) and Rev. Bo Ireland (MDiv'18) and Rev. Alanna Ireland (MDiv'23), are sharing their calls and ministries as we highlight the early and more recent seasons of the seminary. Saint Paul might have looked different for each couple, but through these different eras, the seminary produced similar alums, all of whom are practitioners of contextual ministry and committed to trailblazing innovative paths.

Engaging with John and Gwen, you sense their humble nature and devoted love. Each offers only modest details about themselves, but if you ask them to convey something about the other, they enthusiastically raise accolades about their partner. There is much to convey, as they have both been in ministry for over sixty years, and each has forged new paths regarding gender roles and what partnership looks like.

Their collaboration began at Saint Paul, a place where neither originally planned to attend. John discovered his call on a senior ministry trip sponsored by the Women's Society of Christian Service, where he visited projects in various towns

on the route from Kansas City to New Orleans to Nashville. "It was in Nashville in the Upper Room chapel of all places, that someone offered communion, and at that point I knew I was going to commit my life to a Christian vocation. I started preaching in small churches in the Ozarks when I was 19." John was initially unsure about Saint Paul. "It was just getting off the ground and in the beginning there were no women there yet. I was of an age that I was looking for a relationship and I was not sure about the lack of females, but I applied anyway. I had scholarships from another school, but when I started looking at the economics, I decided to take a chance on Saint Paul."

Gwen enrolled the following year. "In the fall of 1966, John asked me to help with a student-led worship service. I guess it went well because he then asked me to dinner. We dated for over a year before marrying on November 15, 1967. We did not marry in the campus chapel but in the large meeting and lunchroom

in the Center for Renewal building." This distinction seems important to Gwen, perhaps because their ceremony occurred in the heart of the campus. It reflects their experience at the brick-and-mortar campus — the heartbeat of Saint Paul could be felt in the daily interactions at the community meals in this space. It was where faculty, staff, and students forged relationships and connected.



Gwen has a special gratitude for being nestled in Saint Paul's fold. To make her way to Saint Paul, Gwen first had to realize she could be called to ministry and then also discover Saint Paul. In college at the University of Kansas, she met two female campus ministers and first understood she could have a vocation in ministry. "I owe hearing my call to their example. I observed and looked up to them. Until then, I had

only witnessed male pastors." These inspirational pastors had attended Boston University, and Gwen sought to attend their alma mater, but she found it was cost prohibitive. "When I went home to visit and attended church there would be on

occasion visiting student pastors from Saint Paul. These pastors spoke so enthusiastically and highly of their course work and community, before I knew it, I was enrolled and one of the few women studying."

Gwen also knows what it took to be fully embraced by the community. Being one of the first females—and only the second to graduate from Saint Paul—did not always prove to be without resistance. With slightly quieter tone, but one filled with compassion that it was a different time, Gwen described two examples of the trials she faced. During her first year, her Church History professor broke the class into smalls groups with the goal of allowing peers to review the first graded test. Gwen was the only female in the group and made the highest scores. "After we shared our test grades, one guy in the group told me that I was a problem. He said it was problematic that I raised the class average when I was only taking the class to marry a minister. Oh goodness, did he ever make me mad. I asserted that I was here for one reason and that was to become a minister." Another classmate confessed to her towards the end of her preaching class that he was frustrated that he had to waste his time listening to a woman preacher. "He did admit that I was pretty good in the pulpit, but it took a while to shake his premise that women preaching wasn't worth the time, but I certainly did."

Despite these trials, Gwen found many life-giving, vocation affirming moments at Saint Paul as well as her life partner. She never became a campus pastor, but after graduation

she was the first female ordained in the Missouri West (now Missouri) Conference of the UMC and took her first appointment at First UMC in Kansas City. She also made it to Boston when John began working on his Master of Theology in Church History at Harvard University.

Their next season included a move to California where John began his doctoral work. They also transferred UM



Conferences to the Pacific Northwest. They were appointed together to small churches in San Bernardino. Gwen began working in the admissions office of the Claremont School of Theology. She muses that it is here that she took the torch from the two female campus ministers at KU. "My job was to register students and paperwork, but my unofficial role was mentoring female theological students. They would find out that I had graduated seminary and was serving churches, and they would seek me out for conversation and advice. I hope I set an impactful example for them. I know I needed to

see women in ministry to make the leap into this vocation." John completed his doctorate in 1983, and the couple moved to San Diego. "I was appointed as Director of the Mid-City Parish of three churches and as the pastor of Wesley UMC, while Gwen served as the first female pastor at Rolando UMC just a few blocks away from my appointment. We became co-pastors of Normal Heights UMC and served a couple more churches until we both we asked to come out of retirement and serve Wesley UMC."

As much as Gwen credits the female examples for her vocational introduction, she also acknowledges that having a partnership like she has with John was integral to her success. John was quick to note that without Gwen's support he would never have earned his doctorate and deflected any credit for her accomplishments. However, he did add, "Gwen and I have always been mutually supportive partners. We both have always been outsiders in a sense. So, we became, and still are, each other's biggest cheerleaders." John also adds that they

both do not follow societal prescribed gender roles or need to have gender-directed hierarchy in their relationship. "I think having our own understanding that gender is more fluid than the molds society has created has allowed us both to serve to our full potential."

Reflecting on being an early female clergy, Gwen commented on what female pastors have brought to the table. "I realize that women all have an overcoming-the-system story where they had to work hard to be seen and heard. I think this has

forced women to approach ministry in a less formulaic way than male pastors. Female pastors express their uniqueness and often expand their ministries in new ways over their male colleagues. I think we have brought a new level of humanness and sharing of our personalities that have influenced all clergy—male and female—and have impacted how people engage with clergy.”

As they reflected on their time at Saint Paul, John fondly remembers the seminary’s focus on practical ministry. “I’ve been to Claremont, I’ve been to Harvard Divinity School, and they’re all fine schools, but often they don’t really teach you the practice of ministry. I appreciated the dive into how to do ministry at Saint Paul.” John emphasizes this point by recalling how one of his Saint Paul professors, with his historical theology focus, called John to consider all the expressions of Christianity over the church’s history. “Professor Carl Bangs taught that church history makes you more traditional and more liberal simultaneously because you cannot ignore the traditional doctrinal essence of Christianity, nor can you pinpoint a single practice of Christianity. I learned you cannot be a narrow-minded Christian, and that is an edge I have always practiced as a pastor. I have been open to how people understand and revere God and others. There is not a single way.”

Although they attended Saint Paul several seasons later, Bo and Alanna Ireland exemplify John’s point that there is not a single way—and that the seminary leads its graduates to examine context to inform their ministry even if it means stretching new boundaries for how they practice. Bo and Alanna’s call to ministry reflects how different seasons of one’s life are held in tandem and often one season, even

turned away from God, can usher in some of the most Spirit-led, life-giving new spaces. Bo is not shy to say that his call to ministry was borne at the “Red Lodge Montana Youth camp in eighth grade when I was on the straight and narrow and heading to college with a scholarship to Oklahoma City University,” but it was derailed by a thirteen-year stint in broadcast radio and construction that included alcohol and drug abuse before finding sobriety.

“I reluctantly started to attend a suburban church where Alanna worshiped. No one there knew what to think of me. I would pull into the church parking lot full of hybrid Priuses in a big pickup truck, and then go out to the property line and smoke in between worship services. Yet, they loved me and took care of me.” His sobriety and new community refreshed his call to ministry, but his path to appointment to a church was not direct. As Bo recalls this two-year period, “I look back on this time and now see how much of a mismatch I was...people, including leadership, had a hard time seeing me as a pastor.” When Bo was finally tapped to lead a congregation in Wayne, Oklahoma, the District Superintendent gave this description to the awaiting community, “this guy might be something, but he might not. He’s a total wildcard.”

It can pay to bet on a wildcard. Bo was full of fresh

perspectives, energy, and innovation. After thriving in the rural church where he helped a struggling congregation find a renewed sense of community and purpose and starting at Saint Paul to become an Elder in the UMC, Bo served at an urban church and at Skyline Urban ministry. Through these experiences, combined with the readings and courses, Bo began to discern that he was not just called to ministry, but he was called to minister with those experiencing addiction, mental illness, home insecurity—or a combination of all three.



Coinciding with Bo’s deepening discernment, Alanna also began to feel the tug to ministry. “Although as a child, I was interested in mission trips, it was not a push to full-time ministry. My family was very poor and even though I wanted to go on a mission trip, I was never able to save enough money to go. I also went through a phase, when I realized how the church marginalizes a lot of people, including the poor, so basically from my teens into my late twenties, I really didn’t want much to do with the church.”

It wasn’t until Bo—after ten years of marriage—sought sobriety that Alanna returned to worship. “I joined a recovery program for people who are codependent. One of the mottos for this program is take what you like and leave the rest. I started to realize that I could apply this to church. I could reject some fundamental beliefs and traditions that marginalize people, especially the ones that made me feel less than because I did not grow up middle-class or the ones



that don't allow people to be their true selves, but accept the love and hope found in the church.”

As Bo shared readings and lessons from Saint Paul, Alanna realized that seminary could help her understand how to read the Bible in a way that honored the sacredness of the Biblical text while building a theology that embodied the Great Commandment. “What I developed at Saint Paul is a way to hold Scripture and experience in a tension that honors love and inclusion. People often call me to help them do the same. I think that is part of my call—it is being very missional and but also helping people find their place in church and offer church experiences that are not rigid. I think I bring a different perspective to ministry and certainly to the practice of worship. I don't always fit what people expect.”

It is safe to say both Bo and Alanna are wildcards of the most beautiful kind. Their current ministry—one built from scratch with the Holy Spirit—is a testament to what happens when you are used to not fitting inside the boxed norms. They

founded the Lazarus Community at Clark Memorial UMC where Bo is appointed by the UMC to lead the community and church and where Alanna works and worships.

The Lazarus Community is a Residential Center for the unhoused that also offers a food pantry, clothes exchange, and place for the general unhoused to shower and find respite from the elements once per week. Bo describes it as a “modern day monastery providing residential occupancy for urban missionaries and persons transitioning out of homelessness. It is also a Gospel model of the Lazarus story in action, the dead, or those that some would consider as good as dead, are raised to life and the surrounding community or neighborhood is changed through the resurrection. Through the power of Christ we raise the dead, love the least and the lost, and offer healing to the addicted and afflicted.”

How and where the Lazarus Community is taking shape is innovative. Imagine a church – situated in a large building equipped with a sanctuary, parlor, kitchen, and several classrooms – that once housed a large congregation in a

thriving community but saw its congregation dwindle to ten as the surrounding area experienced changes in racial and economic diversity and is now situated in a lower-economic, inner-city community. Sunday school rooms sat empty. Many pastors might not be eager to serve this congregation; however, Bo and Alanna saw transformative opportunity to partner with the community, including the unhoused, the food insecure, the addicts, and the ones suffering mental health issues. Today, the only spaces in Clark Memorial that have kept their historical function are the sanctuary, office, and kitchen. The classrooms have morphed into residential rooms complete with beds and wardrobes, men's and women's locker rooms outfitted with showers, a laundromat, or space housing the food and clothes pantry.

Although still used for worship, the sanctuary has also seen changes. Like all new endeavors, growing pains emerge. Bo and Alanna, with a sad and compassionate attitude, described the obstacle of the existing congregation failing to embrace the changes needed to serve the outside community. Bo explained that a majority of the members



left after he refused to lock the doors during worship, as they had before he arrived. Bo told the greeters to unlock the doors “because I was expecting guests. And that very day we have several members of the community, many unhoused, join us.” Despite the guests, the experience spurred many to leave, and at one point, only two congregates were still worshipping with Bo and Alanna.

Today, they no longer worship on Sunday mornings. Instead, they offer a dinner worship experience where they invite other local churches and groups an urban mission opportunity to cook a meal for the service. Alanna’s eyes lit up as she explained their service. “We rearranged the sanctuary to have one long center table with bistro tables to the side. The altar is now the community itself. We have an average of 30 people each week with many unhoused worshippers. We gather, we sing and share our joy and concerns, we then have intermission where everyone heads to the kitchen for coffee and a hot meal, we bring it back to the sanctuary and have communion, a homily and discussion around the table. It is very causal, and we are not rigid about how to be in worship. We have a lot of people with mental illness

or addiction. They will get up during service walk around or wander outside to smoke and come back in. We do not see this as an interruption, but rather as moving with the Spirit.” One can sense Alanna’s fingerprint on the worship space and service. It aligns with her ability to meet people where they are and to see worship as a fluid experience instead of a prescribed, planned event.



The Ireland duo are still dreaming but also reflecting on what they have learned so far. With great vulnerability they shared some realities that they have had to accept. First, they admit they overextended themselves, and have had to scale back the services they were offering. Second, they gained a better understanding of the population they were working with and how to measure success. Both Bo and Alanna on separate occasions lamented that they underestimated the power of addiction and mental illness on the unhoused. Their ministry cannot lead each member to sobriety and homes. Bo explained that he “had to let go of the idea that every resident is going to immediately take the steps to change their lives. Getting sober is hard, and it takes support.” Alanna chimed in, “You must celebrate the small things. I have no idea what effect two or three days in your own safe room or what a midday shower has on the people here. You trust these moments of respite make a huge difference in the moment and perhaps later down the road.” This sounds a

lot like faith.

Bo and Alanna are candid in sharing the pros and cons of working together. Alanna explains, “Bo and I are each other’s safety nets. We know each other well enough that we know when the other is getting burned out or experiencing compassion fatigue. We intervene and urge for a break or a rest.” She describes how they keep each other accountable as well. “When one of us gets negative or discouraged, the other will urge for it to be followed with two positive thoughts. And we seem to rarely get down at the same time.” They also recognize that they balance each other’s strengths and weaknesses. “Alanna is more organized and handles the administrative details better than me. It is also great to have a female presence here especially for our female community. She brings some calm to the community while I bring a more authoritative bouncer-like presence when needed. I bring other things to the table, and we complement each other.” One thing they agreed that is both a pro and con of working together — they are always around each other. Alanna explains, “We get to see the best and the worst of each other. We get short and snappy with each other. We have communication difficulties sometimes.” Bo adds, “It’s so easy to go home and just talk about work all day and continuing working into the evening. We had to draw some boundary lines and where don’t talk about this place at home.”

Even among the changing seasons, there are anchors. Saint Paul School of Theology is one of those anchors in this time of an altering world. Thanks to the Divine for the consistent stream of graduates versed in contextual, practical ministry. They have, they are, and they will help transform the world.

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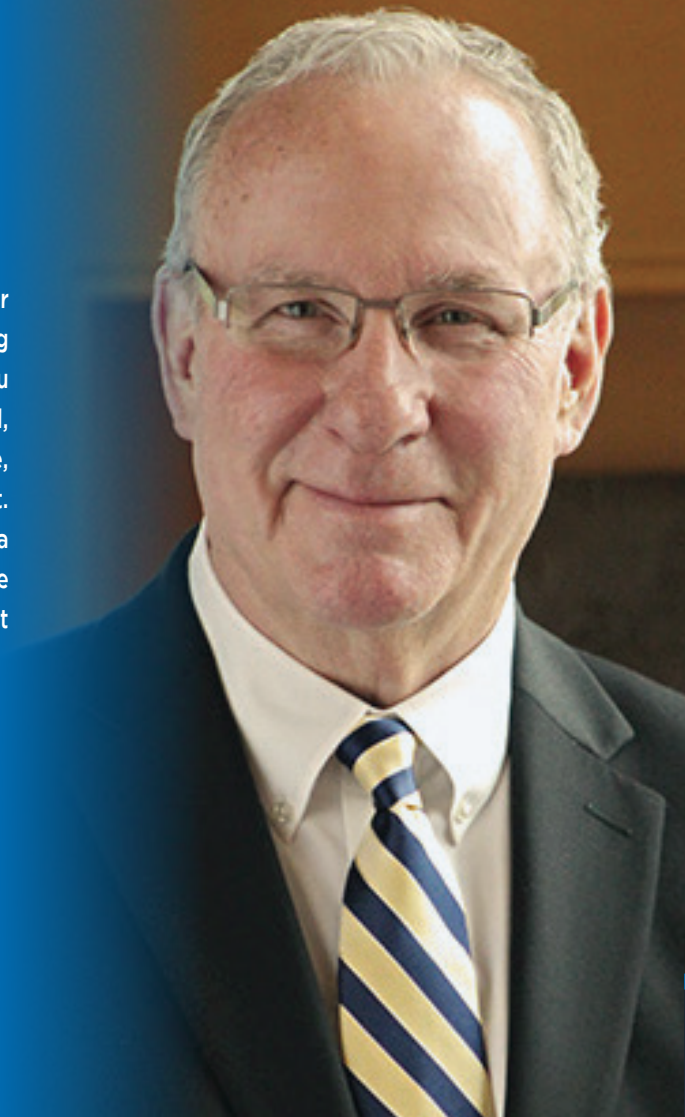
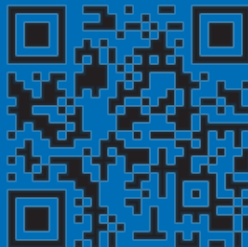
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On March 3, 1958, the National Methodist Theological Seminary (eventually known as Saint Paul School of Theology) was incorporated in Missouri.

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SAVE THE DATE: March 3, 2024

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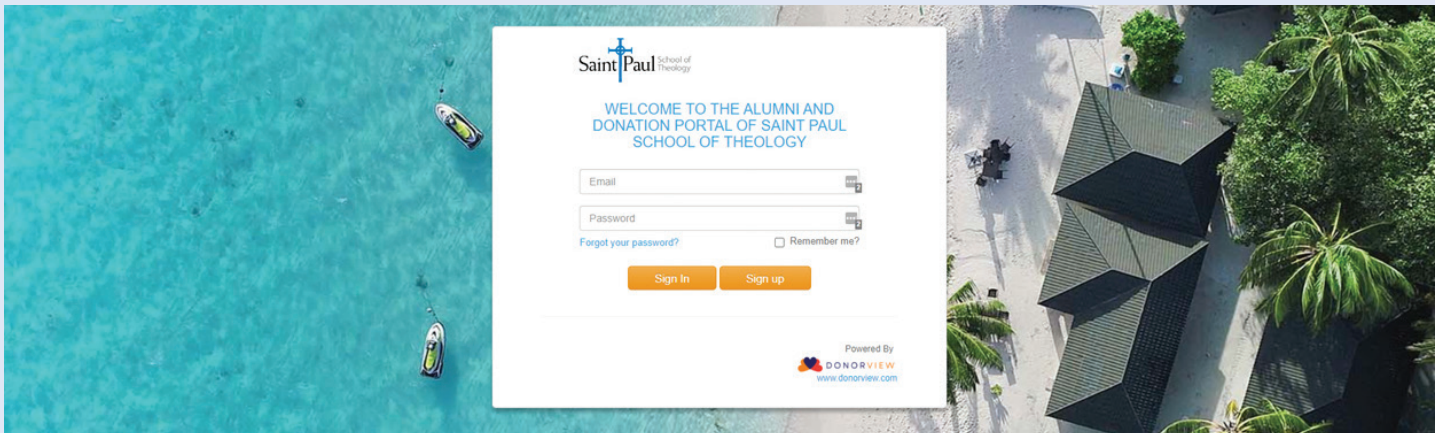
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