

# OUR RELIGIOUS LEADERS



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**in this third** part of our series on individuals who are active in the spiritual lives of our communities, we introduce you to four people who give generously of themselves to help others: The Reverend Dr. Matthew Wooster, Lisa Thomas, the Reverend Stephen Melius, and the Reverend Kevin Crispell.

*left to right: The Reverend Dr. Matthew Wooster, Lisa Thomas, The Reverend Dr. Stephen Melius, and The Reverend Dr. Kevin Crispell*

*The third in a series of articles profiling those who help to enrich our spiritual lives*



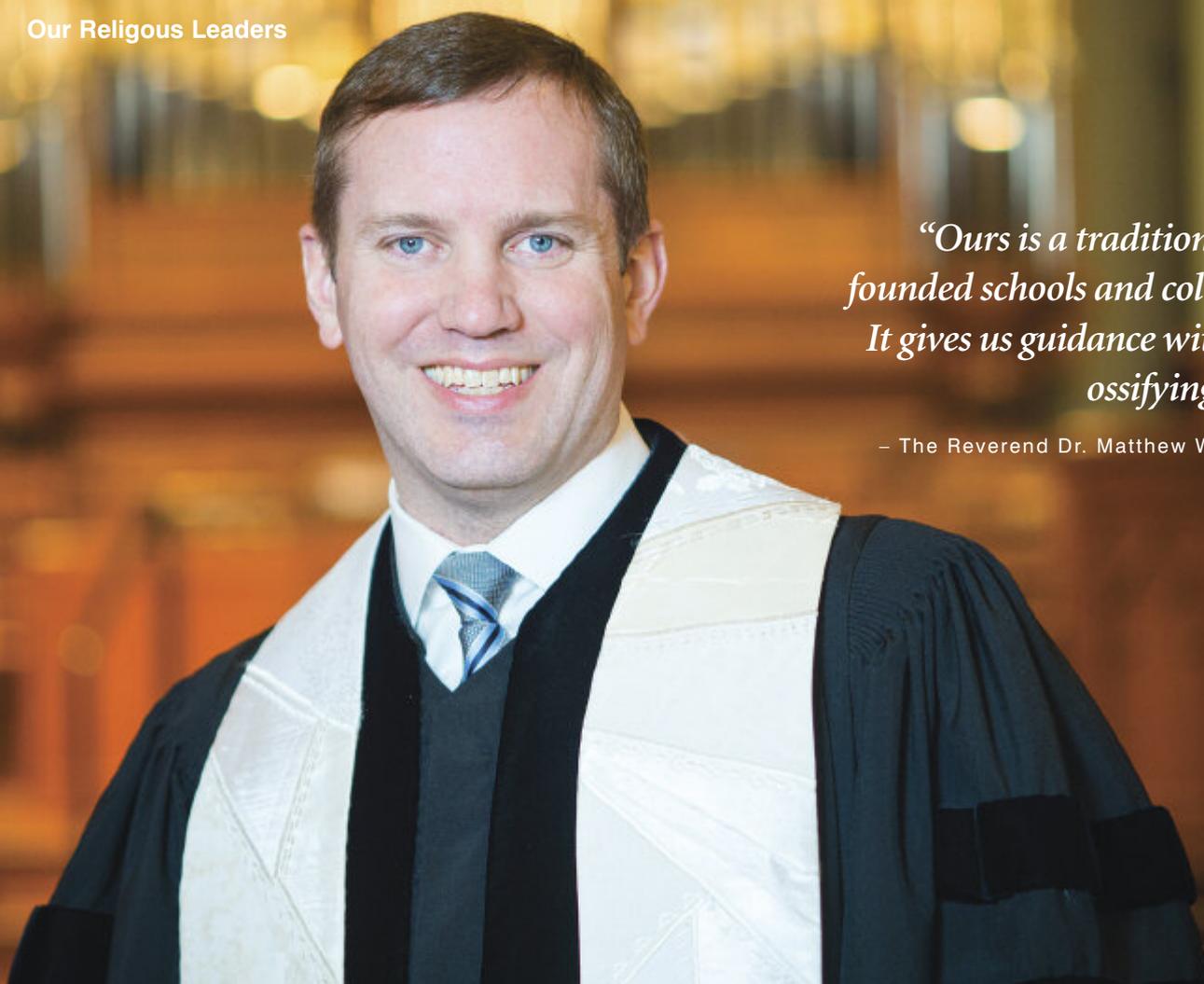
## THE REVEREND DR. MATTHEW WOOSTER

*Wellesley Hills Congregational Church*

When the Rev. Dr. Matt Wooster discusses his work as senior minister of the Wellesley Hills Congregational Church, certain words come up often. Community. Curiosity. Tradition. The words speak to what he hopes to achieve—helping the 850 members of the Hills Church find a shared passion for authentic worship.

“In prayer, the music we sing, the approach of the sermon, all are concerned with being honest and curious and having a humility about our own knowledge,” says Rev. Wooster. “We don’t have a corner on God or understanding who we are or what the world is. We have a rich tradition that allows us to seek answers together. We take God and worship seriously, but we also have a sense of humor and recognize there is room for our own doubts and human-ness.”

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– The Reverend Dr. Matthew Wooster

Raised in “a fantastic church community” near Columbus, Ohio, he felt a call to ministry while an undergraduate at Miami University and received graduate degrees from the Methodist Theological School and Chicago Theological Seminary. After serving two churches in Greater Cleveland, he and his wife, Betsy, moved into the parsonage here the same year his two stepsons graduated from college.

In the Hills Church, he found exactly what he had been searching for. “This church is down-to-earth. These are people who ask good questions and don’t settle for pat answers,” he says. “They are centered in worship, in caring for children and youth, and engagement with neighbors, both near and far.” He cites as an example an outreach partnership in Karnataka, India, where longtime associate minister Rev. Dr. Pash Obeng leads their mission to improve conditions of Siddis (African Indians) and other marginalized peoples.

Founded in 1867, the Hills Church is an “Open and Affirming” congregation of the United Church of Christ. “Congregationalists trace our roots back to the Pilgrims and the founders of Boston,” says Rev. Wooster. “Ours is a tradition that founded schools and colleges. It gives us guidance without ossifying us.” Years ago, that history guided the Hills congregation to declare that people who are gay or lesbian are fully accepted in church life. Today, he says, it teaches them to build relationships with neighbors of different faiths and shape the church for a world that is increasingly connected to other countries and other places.

As a minister, he is continually surprised by the depth of passion, deep sorrow, struggles, or love often hidden below the surface that people can express in a moment or community of trust. “It is a privilege of my work but also of being in a faith community where we can share with each other in an honest way,” says Rev. Wooster.



*“College can be a time of exploration for students who are moving away from, or even back to, the religion they grew up with.”*

— Lisa Thomas

## LISA THOMAS

*Babson College Office of Faith and Service*

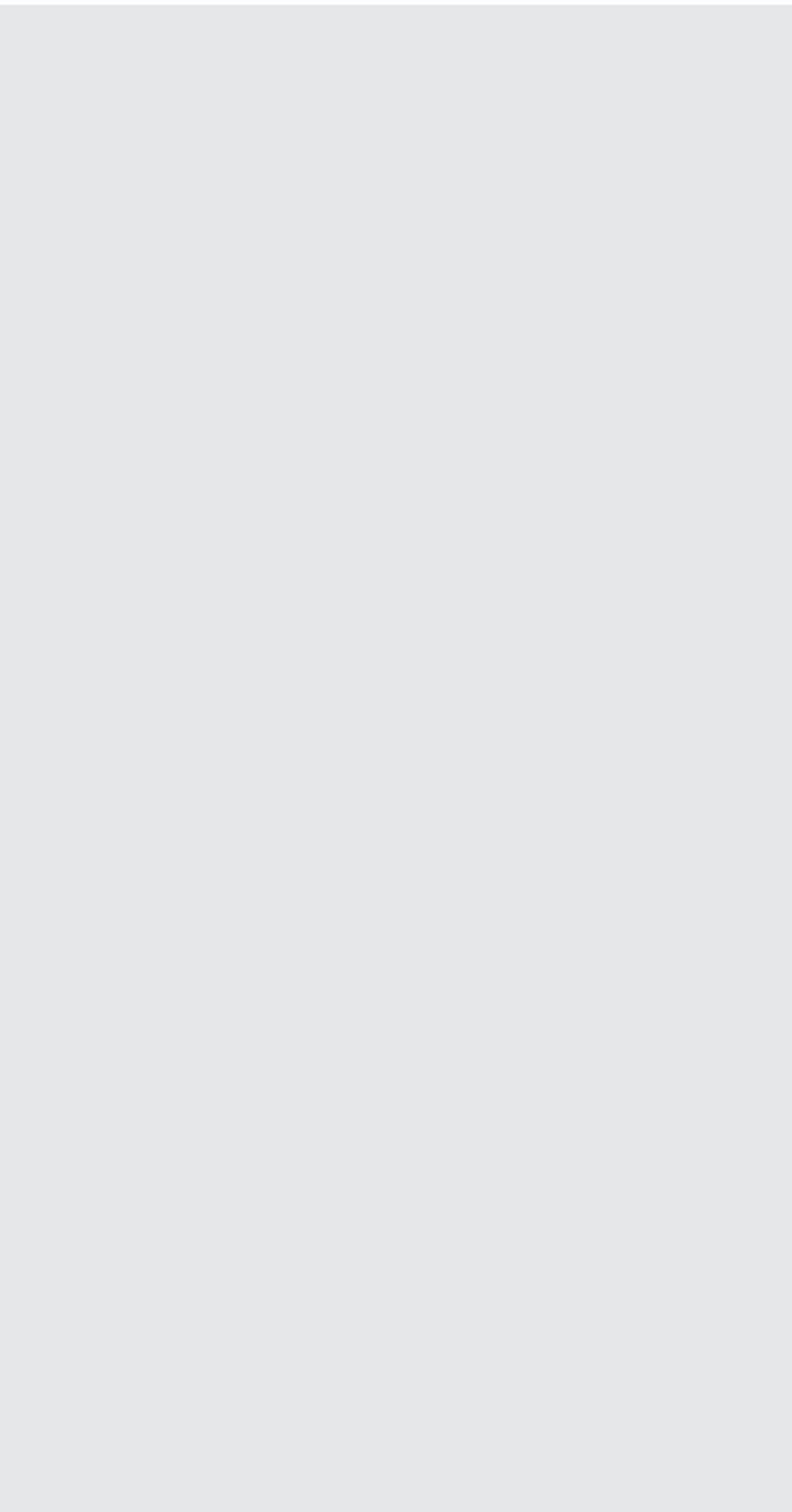
Seven years ago, when Babson College in Wellesley reorganized many of its departments, Lisa Thomas pitched her idea. As head of the volunteer program she created in 1998, she had reported to two ordained ministers in the Office of Spiritual Life. But Babson students come from a wide range of faiths and cultures. Arguing that the college should reach out to all students, she proposed restructuring both halves of the program under a secular director. When the new Office of Faith and Service was approved, Thomas got the job.

“At first, I felt overwhelmed,” says Thomas, a graduate of Ithaca College with a master’s in counseling from Northeastern University.

“When I started the volunteer program, I realized it was what I should have been doing all along, exploring issues like hunger and homelessness. But I’m not your typical religious leader. How could the two parts, faith and service, complement each other? Then I took a step back and realized what they have in common—striving for social justice.

“Babson is not religiously affiliated so our ecumenical approach makes sense,” says Thomas who has worked there for 25 years. “College can be a time of exploration for students who are moving away from, or even back to, the religion they grew up with. Here they can find their path through the variety of religious services and programs we offer.” She heads a team of 12 chaplains from the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant faiths who are on campus part-time but who are highly visible.

Realizing the college’s fast-paced environment doesn’t leave students time for reflection, the team added yoga and meditation sessions. They invite everyone to all forms of worship. Often more than 100 students attend Shabbat services on Friday nights, including many who are not Jewish, to unwind with good food and spiritual awareness. And compared to 2009 when only 2,000 people used the school’s nondenominational chapel (including weddings), last year close to 18,000 people came for Catholic mass, Muslim prayer, Christian worship services, yoga, reflection and more.



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– The Reverend Dr. Stephen Melius

“We are a piece of Babson that does what a business school focused on entrepreneurship does,” says Thomas. “Global leaders add social and economic value everywhere, and that is difficult unless you understand and embrace cultural differences.”

Thomas lives in Wayland with her husband, Tim, their 12-year-old daughter and two sons in college. She’s proud to say that when she launched the volunteer program, it was at the forefront and still is. Babson students completed more than 31,500 hours of community service in 2014-2015, from working with social service agencies, to volunteer opportunities abroad, to teaching entrepreneurship to Wellesley middle school students.

### THE REVEREND DR. STEPHEN MELIUS

#### *Weston United Methodist Church*

Look for the Rev. Dr. Stephen Melius selling pumpkins in October on the front lawn of Weston United Methodist Church (UMC). “Every year, 1,000 pumpkins grown on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico are delivered to us at no charge, something they do nationwide,” says

Weston UMC’s pastor. Two-thirds of the money raised is sent back to the Navajos and one-third goes to two charities in Waltham.

“The United Methodist Church now expects ministers to literally be outside the building to meet people we wouldn’t otherwise meet,” says Rev. Melius. “The pumpkin sale is a good opportunity for people to see the mission work we do.” When drivers on Route 117 stop to shop, the pastor can casually mention weekly study groups and service programs, here and abroad, introduced to the 117-member congregation since his ministry at Weston UMC began 19 years ago.

“My wife, Sandy, and I feel it is part of our ministry to help people in need, in keeping with Jesus’ parables.” When we spoke, a family from Uganda was living with them in the parsonage, as others have done throughout their marriage and while they raised six children.

For 15 years, Sandy Melius chaired the UMC New England Conference Nicaragua Convention Committee, which sponsors projects to help communities in the Central American nation struggling with poverty and a lengthy, severe drought. Currently she chairs Weston UMC’s mission committee. Both husband and wife travel

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annually with the church's team to dig wells and latrines to improve water quality and sanitation, or assist with education, food, clothing, and healthcare programs.

A graduate of Westminster College and Boston University School of Theology, Rev. Melius grew up in Albany, New York.

Two years ago, his son, Alex, died from a heroin overdose. "Alex was 30. When tragedy happens so unexpectedly, it makes you realize how precious life is and think more about eternal

life," says Rev. Melius. "I find myself talking to Alex and to my brother who died last year in his late 70s. Alex's death made me more sensitive to the pain others experience.

"A high percentage of young adults, who the church would want to bring in, now find churches irrelevant or homophobic, or they think we dismiss science, or that we don't act in a Christ-like way, dismissing Muslims and others. They think we believe those who disagree will go to hell," says Rev. Melius. "But none of that is what we believe."

In 2015, Weston UMC voted unanimously to become a "Reconciling" congregation, welcoming everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. "We need to let people know who we are," he says.

## THE REVEREND DR. KEVIN CRISPELL

### *Elmwood Chapel*

"It's no secret the millennial generation walked away from the church," says the Reverend Dr. Kevin Crispell. "The question we need to ask ourselves as ministers is why." Part of the answer, he contends, is "tremendous dissatisfaction with the institutional church, often because of its emphasis on making God in our own image. This led to a therapeutic approach to ministry—specifically self-help solutions, which simply made people feel good about themselves. The church wasn't offering millennials something beyond the superficial," he says. "The contem-

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– The Reverend Dr. Kevin Crispell

porary church was and still is embarrassed by the supernatural or spiritual elements of our faith, and that’s a sad thing to see.”

In December, Crispell will retire after 18 years as pastor of Elmwood Chapel, Wellesley’s 100-member Baptist congregation. But looking forward, he sees exciting times for people of faith.

“Over the next 30 or 40 years, the church will increasingly become more of what actually began in the late ’60s and ’70s when small groups began meeting at local restaurants and coffee houses or in someone’s home to study the Bible or other topics. I’m in one now. We call them ‘life groups.’ Prayer, communion and fellowship can be done in these more intimate settings. Sunday mornings are not necessarily the venue where you want to share your burdens with each other and pray. And from a practical standpoint, someone’s house is more economical than keeping up the expense of maintaining a building.”

“I would never think of myself as a spiritual leader,” says Crispell. “I’m a shepherd. My goal is to simply bring people to the place where they see that life is not about ‘me’ and that I am not the center of my universe.”

After his father left his family when Crispell was young, he and his brother were raised by their single mom who ran a home for unwed mothers. He remembers her wholeheartedly helping others, and he grew up as a musician in the Salvation Army Band, playing trumpet before he was eight years old.

He received a master’s degree and doctorate from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary but taught high school English and drama before joining the ministry at nearly 40 years of age. “Entering as a second career gave me ‘the view from the pew,’ which is unavailable to those who go directly from seminary to pulpit,” he says.

The parents of two adult daughters, Crispell and his wife, Polly, have been married 40 years. They live in Medfield with several rescue cats from an animal shelter where they both hope to volunteer upon retirement. He also looks forward to time for his lifelong love of birding and music, singing in a Baroque and pre-Baroque musical ensemble, and plans to join a community theater group. No matter what, Crispell is grateful for the opportunity to serve. [WW](#)