

## 2025 Antoinette Brown Society Awardees

Rev. Anne Holmes Trailblazing Elder

Rev. Melody Seaton Trailblazer

Rev. Caela Simmons Wood Trailblazing Innovator

**Rev. Melody Seaton**, affectionately known as “Rev. Mel,” is an educator, pastor, and community leader based in Sauk Village, Illinois. Her career spans nearly four decades, beginning as an elementary school teacher and culminating in roles as assistant principal and principal within the Chicago Public Schools system. Rev. Mel’s call to ministry was heard amid a classroom located in a distressed community not far from her own home.

In 2005, Rev. Seaton earned her Master of Divinity from McCormick Theological Seminary while serving in various ministry capacities at Covenant United Church of Christ. She currently serves as the founding and senior pastor of Grace United Church of Christ in Sauk Village. Under her leadership, the church has initiated numerous community outreach programs, including coat and school supply drives, a food pantry, and the establishment of the It Takes a Village Community Farm—a project dedicated to providing organic produce to local residents and addressing food insecurity.

Beyond her pastoral duties, Rev. Seaton is the Program Director for the Thriving Pastors in Revitalizing Congregations (TPIRC) initiative within the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ. Rev. Seaton is also an author; her debut children’s book, “What Does God Look Like?”, encourages young readers to explore and recognize the presence of God in everyday life. Her multifaceted contributions continue to inspire and uplift those she serves especially six little people who call her, ‘Grandma’.

**The Rev. Caela Simmons Wood** (she/her) was ordained for ministry in the United Church of Christ in 2010. She is the proud daughter of two career public-school educators. She and her husband live with their two teenagers and a menagerie of animals including, but not limited to, a dog, two guinea pigs, various fish, and backyard chickens. Caela is passionate about understanding and confronting systemic injustices, especially relating to race, gender, and sexuality.

A fifth-generation Kansan, Caela has served as the pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Manhattan, Kansas since 2014. Kansas is historically home to the Kaw, Osage, and Pawnee nations, among others. Caela previously served as the Associate Pastor at First United Church in Bloomington, Indiana. During her time in the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference, Caela has immensely enjoyed serving in various leadership roles including the Committee on Ministry (discernment) and president of the KO Conference Board of Directors. She is also a participant in the Next Generation Leadership Initiative.

She is grateful for philanthropists who funded the degrees she pursued as a young adult: a B.A. in History from Kansas State University, a Master of Theological Studies from Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, and a Master of Divinity at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Caela completed her training as a spiritual director through the Souljourners program at the Sophia Center in 2023 and maintains a small practice as a spiritual director. She also serves as a volunteer chaplain in the Civil Air Patrol, U.S. Air Force Auxiliary.

**Rev. Anne Holmes** is a retired UCC minister. She served in active ministry for over 50 years in various capacities among which as Hospital Chaplain and Interim Pastor. Anne remains committed to nurturing members in discernment particularly African Americans and other underrepresented groups in the UCC as they pursue ordained ministry. Anne blazed a trail for same gender loving women to not only be ordained but also included in active pastoral ministry and wider church involvement. She was equally mindful and dedicated to African American clergy as she witnessed the racism in her beloved denomination. She was ordained in 1982 at Emmaus United Church of Christ in Vienna, VA, Central Atlantic Conference being the first openly gay woman ordained in the UCC. Her journey to the pulpit was one full of prejudicial hurdles and misogynistic roadblocks, and yet it was also a testimony to the tenacity and deep sense of call to the ministry of Jesus Christ within Anne.

Anne treats all people with a heart of compassion and a desire to listen carefully for understanding and commonality. Her dedication to the advancement of women in ministry and the pursuit of social and racial justice work ensure that she will surely leave this world in a far more accepting and equitable place for those who follow in her footsteps. Anne is a cherished part of the unfolding social justice history of the United Church of Christ. She is a certified racial justice facilitator having completed the Sacred Conversation to End Racism curriculum. She continues to be one of the facilitators on CAC's Racial Justice Leadership Team. One of her primary roles is to walk with local churches through a one-year journey as they undergo the Antiracist Local Church Audit, which supports churches in discerning and developing impactful racial justice work. During this journey, church members also complete their Racial Justice Autobiography, a module created by Anne, that invites them into deep reflection around their life journey and blind spots of racism, both personal and communal.

The Central Atlantic Conference staff shared, "We are proud to count Anne as a clergy colleague among us. She served faithfully in the CAC and her entire ministry was in this conference. We are overjoyed for her." Finding balance in life and ministry, Anne relishes time with her wife Linda, her family, and is a regular presence in the lives of her grandchildren.