

SYI ALUMS RETURN TO PTS

It was summer 2006 when 25 high school students from all over the United States gathered at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for the two-week Miller Summer Youth Institute, seeking to build a Christian community in which to be challenged in faith and theological study. Now seven years have passed, and four of those 25 from different walks of life have found their way back to PTS: Cassandra Millis, David Davenport, Brian Lays, and Rebecca Dix.



Cassandra Millis (pictured right) first heard of the Miller SYI when the former program director the Rev. Ellie Johns-Kelley '00 spoke at her church in Erie, Pa. Cassandra's pastors encouraged her to apply. While attending SYI she remembers having deep conversations about faith, God, and life with peers and knowing this wasn't happening elsewhere. When she returned home, all her friends asked if she was then going to become a pastor. No, she said. Because of SYI Cassandra preached at her church, and the congregation confirmed what her friends had been saying. Then she went to a Presbytery meeting where she heard again the same message. And then a complete stranger encouraged her to become a pastor, saying though he didn't know her, he knew her God. She followed God's call and though she wanted to attend a different seminary than PTS, when she visited here it felt comfortable.

David Davenport '13 (pictured second from left), from Evansville, Ind., heard of SYI through his brothers who had attended in previous years. Being interested in topics of philosophy and theology, SYI seemed like a good idea. Two weeks filled with good conversations and small group discussions. He particularly enjoyed the classes taught by Dr. Tuell and Dr. Allison, which were motivating factors in his later decision to attend PTS. Through SYI, he knew the caliber of professors at the Seminary, and wanted to re-expose himself to that. He was able to, especially in writing his M.A. thesis with Dr. Allison.

Encouraged by a member in his congregation in Denver, Colo., Brian Lays (pictured second from right) attended SYI. Brian had wanted to be a pastor since ninth grade. He says that SYI was a place where there were conversations about theology which until then hadn't happened for him. Brian's studies in the area had been through his personal reading. "SYI was challenging because unlike books, which present a thesis and don't ask anything of you, the questions and topics that surfaced in these conversations, classes, and small groups didn't always have a straight forward answer," he says. Upon graduating college with a bachelor's in Spanish language and literature, Brian hadn't planned on going to seminary for a while, but will be a Middler at PTS this fall.

Rebecca Dix (pictured left), born and raised in Aplington, Iowa, was encouraged to apply by her pastor who knew of the program. "I remember squealing and jumping up and down upon receiving my acceptance packet," she says. And she hasn't been the same since. It was the first time she engaged with questions of faith, religion, vocation, and Scripture, especially with people her same age. Rebecca prepared for her calling by studying writing/rhetoric and theatre in undergrad, fell in love with performing the Scripture, and knew after undergrad she had to continue her preparation—but was not going to seminary. After many closed doors and much procrastination, Rebecca agreed to visit PTS, if only to get people to stop bugging her about it. When she did, it felt right. "I've recently realized that my calling to be a minister is not giving up my calling to be a storyteller artist."

These are the stories of just four of the students who have attending the Miller Summer Youth Institute and then have come to study at PTS. Others have attended additional seminaries. Still others have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, business professional. Others have pursued a variety of different careers. The students, regardless of future vocation, have been transformed by their time spent at Pittsburgh Seminary exploring theology and God's call for their life. This year's Summer Youth Institute runs July 6-20 and will no doubt greatly impact the future of these high schoolers as well.

Written July 2013

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