

## Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) Held its Virtual Commencement

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Students often look forward to the day they graduate. But this year, the Class of 2020 is graduating in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, where many public commencement ceremonies have been canceled. Strictly online classes and now virtual graduations have become a big adjustment for millions of students, including those at the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) in Barrytown, New York, which held its virtual commencement on Saturday, May 23.

"Balancing classes with everything in life is already challenging, but especially this past

semester," said Naokimi Ushiroda, a Unificationist and assistant pastor of the Clifton Family Church in New Jersey. Part of a special student cohort, Pastor Naokimi has been pursuing his Master's Degree in an accelerated program at UTS where reading is lengthy and deadlines for papers are tight. He is also a husband and father working full time in his ministry role, currently as the interim pastor during the senior pastor's maternity leave. "I'm focusing on the positives of this pandemic situation," said Pastor Naokimi. "We had to physically meet every week in New York City for one of our classes before the pandemic, but then that class was switched to online, so that saved time on commuting."

However, like many others, Pastor Naokimi acknowledges the challenges of virtual learning. "It really reduces the organic interaction between the professor and the students, and students among each other," he said. "The classes are an instructional learning style where class engagement can be low, so it's very tempting to engage in other things when you are taking a class from home," said Pastor Naokimi.

It can also prove more difficult depending on the student's personal learning style and study habits. "It has been a lot to juggle," said Taka Sugawara, a Unificationist and UTS graduate student. "I enjoyed the lectures that were uploaded online and going at my own pace, but it was easy to fall behind in the online classes because they tend to be a lot more contingent on the student's self accountability. I think for serious learning I prefer being in a classroom and sharing the experience with everyone."

For others, though, the transition to e-learning was a welcome alternative. "I'm really grateful for the online classes," said Senior Pastor Crescentia DeGoede of the Clifton Family Church. "I'm unique in the sense that I was going on maternity leave, so I expected to do online learning for all of my classes. However, I'm the type of learner who enjoys being in the classroom with everyone and having robust discussions, so I'm concerned about the long-term picture and how long this pandemic will last. There is the learning aspect of getting your education but there is also the social aspect."

Across the U.S., people have largely embraced what many are calling a "new normal" -- life at a social distance. While a televised national graduation event [recently aired](#) honoring all high school seniors in the Class of 2020, countless families and friends have celebrated with congratulatory posters scattered across lawns and taped to cars as they drove past a graduate's home. Youth and Young Adult Ministry (YAYAM), a branch of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) USA, is also celebrating with three [online parties](#) scheduled for graduating high school, college, and Generation Peace Academy (GPA) students.

"I'm so inspired by the creativity that people are demonstrating during this time," said Senior Pastor Crescentia. "We can't change what is happening right now, so the fact that people still find a way to make graduations special is amazing. This has connected me more with neighbors that I didn't know had a graduate."

"It's staggering how we are able to leverage our technology to cope with this," added Sugawara, who lives in New York but has been participating in an online fitness class and language course in California. "I'm impressed with how people were able to adapt so quickly during this pandemic."

It remains uncertain in some parts of the country whether learning solely online will continue throughout 2020, but if it does, UTS students presume substantial changes. "I spent Memorial Day finishing papers rather than relaxing with my family," said Pastor Naokimi. "I think the challenge is really on the professors to improve the utilization of technology to make online classes more functional. And I think adjusting the workload so there is less assigned outside of the classroom is also necessary to stay student friendly."