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SFTS carbon footprint report a model for all seminaries

SAN ANSELMO, Calif., Sept. 14 – San Francisco Theological Seminary’s recent carbon footprint analysis marks a vital first step to curtail carbon dioxide emissions and educate future leaders of the church. Leading the way among seminaries, SFTS has been asked to share its report with Green Seminary Initiative national members in order for other seminaries to analyze their carbon footprints as well.

“It is ecclesiastical suicide to send students into the world without understanding the world we live in, and climate change is so significant a factor in today’s world,” said Rev. Charles Marks, SFTS chaplain. “Respect for creation should be embedded in all our preparation for ministry, no matter what kind of ministry, and we needed to think about how the Seminary can take that responsibility.”

Rev. Marks convened a group to discuss what the Seminary could do about reducing carbon emissions in April 2008. A week earlier, Rev. Renee Rico had preached during chapel, sharing her concerns about the environment in her role as national coordinator of Presbyterians for Restoring Creation. (Rico is now interim pastor at Sausalito Presbyterian Church and leads retreats for congregations as they take steps to become green.)

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy also encourages action to reduce greenhouse emissions. In its policy that was ratified during the 2008 General Assembly, Presbyterian-related seminaries and conference centers were urged to make environmental education on global climate change and energy a part of their curricula, take measures to reduce energy consumption, and encourage holistic thinking about the relationships between technology and nature.

Supported by Dr. Carol Robb, the Margaret Dollar Professor of Christian Social Ethics, senior Doug Olds headed the SFTS research and writing team that studied 2008 as the baseline for SFTS’s carbon footprint. Olds had produced a smaller scale study at First Presbyterian Church in San Anselmo when he served there as an intern. SFTS intern Evans Presley-McGowan also provided key contributions, including logging airline itineraries and tracking student and staff commuter miles and gas mileage for the report.

SFTS measured three areas to calculate its carbon footprint: direct emissions in the form of utilities; transportation emissions; and indirect emissions in the form of

purchased material products and outside services. It is estimated that SFTS emits 1.6 million kilograms of carbon dioxide gas from operations for a footprint of 436 metric tons of solid carbon. (Transportation, including travel by air and automobiles, accounts for more than 40 percent of the emissions.)

If the Seminary were to purchase carbon offsets, representing the social expense of its operations on the larger world, it would cost \$28,340. Instead of purchasing carbon offsets, the report recommends to invest this amount per year in energy conservation, efficiencies and renewables. The annual investments will decrease the Seminary's carbon footprint each year, thus lowering the amount needed to invest annually over time. The SFTS report calls for an 80-percent reduction of CO2 emissions by 2050, meeting President Barack Obama's call for the U.S. economy.

"Our immediate goal is to get people discussing the report," said Robb. "We are offering this study to the various groups in our community and asking what can we do, given who we are and what responsibility we have? Significant change can only take place when students, faculty, staff and administrators make initiatives in a co-operative venue. During the course of this fall semester, we hope the different groups will generate significant recommendations."

Robb has spearheaded many environmental projects during her 24-year affiliation with SFTS. Take the community garden, for example. For nearly two decades students, faculty and staff have maintained an organic garden, fostering a spirit of connection to the earth. Other classes successfully organized proposals to install solar panels on Trinity House and Oxtoby Hall for heating water.

Her students have also produced research, including the 2009 Doctor of Ministry Summer Term class "Thinking Ethically and Theologically about Climate Change." Using resources from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), plus governmental reports and news coverage from their specific regions, scholar-pastors reflected biblically and theologically on the responsibilities of their own churches to be proactive in addressing climate change. Their findings and insights are now available as a resource on the SFTS web site.

"At SFTS, students have an opportunity to take Environmental Ethics, which fits into their curriculum, and other courses that reinforce the significance of nature as a way of knowing God," Robb said. "But probably more important than the curriculum is the immediate access to the natural environment."

San Anselmo was specifically chosen by SFTS forefathers because of its invigorating surroundings, despite ample reasons to remain in San Francisco, or move to Berkeley or Palo Alto due to proximity to renowned universities. Today, 117 years later, SFTS remains a "theological sanitarium" where deer feed on hillsides, redwood trees flourish and views are awe-inspiring.

"Appreciation for this natural environment is deeply rooted in SFTS's heritage," Robb says.

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San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) graduate school, has prepared whole leaders for the whole church since 1871. One of the founding members of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, it offers theological degrees at two campuses, in San Anselmo and Pasadena. Its innovative Program in Christian Spirituality is open to clergy and non-ordained individuals. For more information please call SFTS at 1-800-447-8820 in San Anselmo or 1-800-473-8772 in Pasadena. Also find information on our Web site: www.sfts.edu.