

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

April/May 2015

Dear Friends,

In my previous letter, I posed a question: If you could appoint a faculty of 12 people for a theological seminary, what intellectual and spiritual focus would you want them to have? In other words, what would the core faculty of a theological school look like in the 21st century?

The response to this challenge has been amazing and gratifying. More than 50 people have sent emails, called, written letters, or returned the chart with their suggestions. The responses have been thoughtful and thought provoking. I have read every one of them and we are now compiling them so that we can share them more broadly. Rightly, all affirm the importance of Old and New Testament scholars, theologians, and church historians. Beyond that, there is divergence and debate, and a lot of good and provocative ideas. The SFTS Faculty has also taken its first cut at this exercise. So, a conversation is now begun, and will continue into the coming year.

In this letter I want to pick up where I left off last time. In March, I proposed four categories of faculty disciplines—Sacred Texts, Theology, The Arts, and Science and Technology—and I offered my thoughts on the first two, then ran out of space. Now I want to address the third and fourth categories. Maybe some of you were waiting for me to complete my essay before you responded. If so, I encourage you to send in your thoughts after reading this. I'm interested in the discussion—the ideas, rationale, analysis, and assumptions that inform your choices. So, let's continue:

The Arts. Music is the obvious place to begin to talk about the importance of the Arts in theological education. “Those who sing pray twice,” Augustine of Hippo said long ago. Something extraordinary happens to the human spirit when we sing the words that could just as easily be spoken—and even more so when communities sing together with gusto, reverence, and fervor. That's powerful and transformative.

Theological education doesn't pretend to teach people how to sing, but maybe it should. Singing is embodied prayer, like dancing. You can't sing or pray with only your mind. You have to bring your whole self to these art forms. They're incarnational. They engage the human spirit. They invoke the Holy Spirit. They take us out of ourselves and into another realm, the divine, especially when practiced in community. This dimension of human experience should play an essential role in a student's spiritual formation.

Don't get me wrong. Yes, I think that seminary graduates should know how music fits into the rhythm and shape of the liturgy, have a quiver full of ideas about how to use different kinds of music in worship and an understanding of the contributions Gregorian chant and J.S. Bach have made to sacred music. But I'm not suggesting that we should be teaching music appreciation or art history or helping students understand the contested relationship of art in Christian theology. That's all head stuff—further engagement of the left side of the brain in a curriculum that's already tilted too far that way as it is.

No, what I'm suggesting is that we have *artists* on the faculty—poets, actors, painters, sculptors, photographers, musicians, novelists, dancers, singers—practitioners and doers who can help students engage the right side of their brains, their creative sides, their imaginations. And not just the students, but the rest of the faculty as well. If we want SFTS to be a hub for innovation in ministry, we need to encourage, dare I say *ignite*, the imagination. That's what artists do and that's what an artist or two on the faculty would do for theological education and ultimately for the Church itself. Artists engage the emotions,

the heart, the whole person. They can move us to take courage, take action, embrace hope, create, and think afresh about the world and ourselves. The Arts have the power to incite and heal.

Could we make room on our faculty for one or two performing artists?

Science and Technology. Last January Charles Hard Townes, professor emeritus of physics at the University of California, Berkeley, died at the age of 99. In 1964, when Townes was a professor at Columbia University, he shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with two Russian scientists for the invention of the laser. That same year, he also delivered a talk at Riverside Church in New York City on the convergence of science and religion. That talk and the subsequent articles published in an IBM journal and an MIT magazine established Townes as an early and unique voice, especially among scientists, in the exploration of the relationship between scientific and theological inquiry. Townes also won the Templeton Prize for his work in this area in 2005. When he accepted the award, he noted “there is no long-range question more important than the purpose and meaning of our lives and our universe.”¹

For 25 years the Hubble Space Telescope has been taking high-resolution images deep into time and space. When I was an associate pastor in Bloomington, IN, in the late 1970s, there were several astronomers in the congregation who were on the Indiana University faculty. Night after night for 40 years, Martin Burkhead has gazed into the universe. In a conversation with me just last month, Martin expressed his deep longing that Christians would somehow be moved to appropriate and appreciate more deeply the wonder and miracle of planet Earth and of life itself. Somehow I don't think he was referring to a daily reading of Psalm 8 or Genesis 1...

Sadly, there remains a strong strain of anti-scientific prejudice among people of faith, whether they are deniers of climate change or creationists. No one should consider scientific ignorance a badge of honor for the faithful. We should be long past the point of believing that science and religion are opposed to one another.

These are the extremes, of course. Yet, even well-educated people, and perhaps especially clergy, have little understanding of or exposure to the important scientific work being done in so many fields—I'm thinking primarily here of the earth sciences like ecology and oceanography, life sciences such as microbiology, biomedicine, and neuroscience, as well as physics and astronomy. We need to find a way to engage students and faculty, and ultimately the Church, with the research and scientific methodologies that are changing not only what we know of our world but how we interact with it and with one another. It is Townes' question writ large.

This is a vast area—perhaps too vast. But I'm wondering how we can bring the exciting and world-changing knowledge of science and technology into a closer dialogue with our sacred texts and theological inquiries. Is there a place for this on a faculty of 12 in a 21st theological seminary?

May the winds of Pentecost blow mightily through our hearts and across the globe, bringing peace and making all things new.



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald
President and Professor of Faith & Public Life

1 David Gibson, Religion News Service, in the *Christian Century*, March 4, 2015, p. 17.

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