

AUDEMUS

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

March 2015

Dear Friends,

Let me ask you a question. If you could appoint a faculty of just 12 people for a theological seminary, what intellectual and spiritual focus would you want those 12 people to have? In other words, what would the core faculty of a theological school consist of here in the 21st century?

I'm not asking you to design a curriculum or suggest specific courses. I'm inviting you to consider what subjects/disciplines/fields should comprise the essence of a seminary faculty. These dozen areas of expertise would define the nature of the intellectual and spiritual education of the students who study here. The interaction of these 12 areas could also make a contribution to the larger church and society as they engaged with each other on the key religious and moral questions of our time. What 12 disciplines would you like to learn from in terms of furthering your own theological education? What would the SFTS faculty look like if it were uniquely suited to influence the culture and church, and produce graduates who are equipped to engage in ministries of justice, peace, and healing?

Below is the chart for the subjects, disciplines, and/or fields you find most important. I encourage you to fill it in and return it to me.

Traditionally, a seminary would divide the faculty into the four classic disciplines: Bible, Church History, Theology and Ethics, and Practical Ministry. With this understanding you might have chosen Old Testament, New Testament, Patristics (The Early Church Fathers), the Reformation, American Church History, Systematic Theology, Historical Theology (e.g., Religious Thought Since 1800), Christian Ethics, Evangelism and Mission, Reformed Worship, Preaching, and Church Administration. Of course some of the faculty might have taught more than one subject in a particular area. You also might have several Old Testament scholars (e.g., specializing in the Pentateuch, the Prophets, or Wisdom Literature) and New Testament scholars (e.g., specializing in the Gospels or Paul), etc., etc.

The task I am suggesting would be easier, I'm quite sure, if you could choose 25 faculty, or better yet, 40. But at SFTS we are thinking about 12. This would be our core faculty. These dozen people would define the soul of theological education at SFTS. They would comprise the crux of the education we are offering the religious leaders of tomorrow.

In most universities, the task of shaping the faculty is usually the job of the faculty itself, with some direction provided by the administration. In fact, I have asked the SFTS faculty to engage in the very exercise I am outlining here in this Audemus. I am eager to hear what they come up with and to engage with them individually and collectively. And also to compare it with what you might suggest.

I do not have my list of 12 ready to share with you. In fact, I am finding this to be a challenging exercise. Even so, let me share a couple of ideas that have been swirling around in my head and giving my brain a workout. Think outside the box with me for a moment.

||||| **WE DECIDE WE DARE WE DO** |||||

What if we were to think about the core faculty in terms of the following categories:

- Sacred Texts
- Theology
- The Arts
- Science and Technology

Sacred Texts. At the core of Christian faith is a sacred text, the Bible—foundational in every way. Everything we do issues from our understanding of our sacred text. Without the Bible, our curriculum ceases to make sense. The Bible is the sine qua non of our faith, our life together, and our actions in the world. Through the Bible, we come to know Jesus and him as the Christ. Studying and teaching the Bible as God’s Word is uniquely the preserve of seminaries and theological schools. Through Biblical studies, seminaries bring depth and breadth to the power of God’s Word to change lives and relationships. Why would we have a seminary if we don’t have our sacred texts at the center of our curriculum?

So here’s my unorthodox idea. In addition to faculty devoted to the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, wouldn’t it make sense for Christian ministers to be exposed to and study the Qur’an, the sacred text of Islam? Shouldn’t we have on the SFTS core faculty someone who could help Christians better understand the sacred text of the second largest religion in the world?

Theology. Theology concerns itself with both our sacred texts and our human experience. It reflects on and analyzes both. It teaches us to draw inferences, make connections, and search for applications. It is both conceptual and action oriented. It challenges us to re-examine our understanding of who we are and who God is, and then to ask “so what?” It includes ethics. I would include Church History as well since it reminds us how and why theology mattered in other times and places. A curriculum without theology doesn’t make sense for a seminary. But what are the key approaches to theology that should be included in a core faculty?

Theology is highly contextualized, meaning it is shaped by the circumstances and social locations of those who live and espouse it. It is hard for anyone to separate himself or herself from the culture s/he lives in. People who live in affluent societies can benefit from interacting with those who are hungry and poor. Those who are excluded or oppressed, or who live on the economic or social margins of society can help those with power or connections to power learn new and important things about God. Good theology makes the church better in its witness to the world. Inadequate approaches to theology create more dissension, more violence, more injustice, more brokenness. How would you ensure that SFTS produces leaders who understand and can do good theology? What has made a difference for you in your life?

I am running out of space in this letter to address the third and fourth categories in my list. I will take these up in my April letter. Stay tuned!

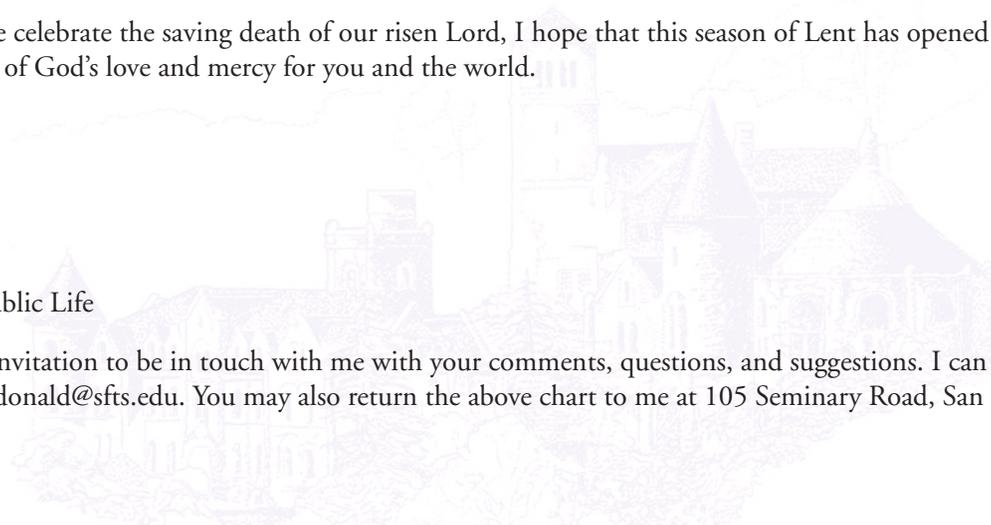
As we enter into Holy Week where we celebrate the saving death of our risen Lord, I hope that this season of Lent has opened your heart anew to the amazing grace of God’s love and mercy for you and the world.

Grace and peace,



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

P.S. – As always, I extend to you the invitation to be in touch with me with your comments, questions, and suggestions. I can be reached at (415) 451-2812 or jmcdonald@sfts.edu. You may also return the above chart to me at 105 Seminary Road, San Anselmo, CA, 94960.



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