

# AUDEMUS

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

December 2015

Dear Friends,

As 2015 draws to a close, I'd like to take this moment to recount some of the dramatic changes that have been occurring recently. At the Seminary we are taking to heart the Apostle Paul's distillation of the Gospel— "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, there is a New Creation." Paul tells us that in Christ we live in a new reality. Christ's love shapes us and motivates all that we do. Everything is changed in Christ—ourselves, our relationships, our world view.

For the last two and a half years, we have been reshaping our approach to theological education to speak to the circumstances of a world in upheaval and a Church that seeks to be faithful and hopeful in the midst of such turmoil and change. We believe that God is in the midst of all this, urging us on.

Our Master of Divinity program underwent a systematic and deep evaluation during the 2013-2014 academic year. The result is a newly-structured course of study that integrates disciplines, faculty, teaching and learning styles, and a diverse group of students. Online classes, the tutorial format, and interdisciplinary lectures were designed to create a multi-faceted learning experience that grounds students biblically and theologically, giving them the intellectual tools to analyze critically our sacred texts and the worldly contexts where ministry takes place.

The SFTS educational experience keeps students focused on the good news of the gospel. It welcomes and extends hospitality to all—SFTS students are a richly diverse group in myriad ways. We encourage community building through worship, study, prayer and service. We challenge students to integrate spirituality with the call for justice, service to others with self-care and self-reflection, intellectual rigor with their worship and prayer life. We prepare students for ministry over the long haul, in a variety of settings, using a multiplicity of gifts.

Dr. Chris Ocker, SFTS Professor of Church History, is a leader among the faculty in the effort to teach students online. In his own words, he finds online instruction "surprisingly refreshing and exciting. Translating courses to online versions and adapting to new media makes me aware of what I'm doing and how I'm doing it. I have to rethink everything I teach in order for it to fit new media."

Professor Ocker's research and online postings have become the foundation for his tutorial classes—the Oxford-Cambridge teaching model that the faculty have adopted—in which three or four students at a time gather in his study for in-depth discussion of the material rather than sitting in a lecture hall taking notes. The tutorials foster dialogue, argumentation, and independent thought through small group interaction. "I find that I have a lot more time to get to know the students and how they're learning, he noted, "and it allows me to accommodate their goals and interests. Everything is based on a small group conversation, so students are more present."

Our Doctor of Ministry program, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Virstan Choy, has also seen impressive changes. Typically, D.Min. programs have focused on further academic training for individuals who want to enhance their ministry skills. With today's evolving spiritual environment, SFTS is drawing students of varied ages and backgrounds as well as from other faith traditions who view SFTS more as a place where they can explore new ways to create lasting change. According to Professor Choy, "Our students come here to study and work on projects and experiments, not for themselves only, but for new understandings, approaches, and tools that can be useful to others engaged in the practice of ministry."

In this way, SFTS is becoming a research and development laboratory for faith-driven change in the world. Such an approach places the D.Min. program squarely within the mission and vision of the nascent Center for Innovation in Ministry. (Right now the Center for Innovation in Ministry is seeking a Director who will bring a set of entrepreneurial sensibilities and

skills, business acumen, and deep faith commitments to bear on the next phase of the Center's development. I trust I'll have some exciting news to report to you in the new year.)

It stands to reason that an innovative program such as the SFTS D.Min. would also take a fresh approach to the culminating project—the dissertation. We have redefined the parameters of the traditional 200-page written document by including the use of digital media when appropriate. As Professor Choy points out, “For the student using dance as part of their therapy with Alzheimer’s patients, or the one developing a new style of music, a written research paper won’t adequately cover the body of their work. If we’re going to be responsive to new ministry, we have to reconceive our program to not just be print oriented.”

“The Seminary is reconceiving, researching, and developing relationships in order to best serve the new generation of D.Min. students,” says Professor Choy. “We are committed to teaching students. Just as we are encouraging our students to find new ways of ministry, the Seminary is researching innovative ways to teach.”

I wish you could personally meet some of our current students and recent graduates. For example,

- Jenna Meyers, a 20-something Presbyterian and 2015 M.Div. graduate, who’s working at the Marin County Center for Domestic Peace, where they have developed a comprehensive community effort to end the #1 violent crime in Marin County: domestic violence.

Or,

- Stewart Perrilliat, a recent MATS graduate now working toward his D.Min. and DASD. Stewart founded Man 2 Man Mentoring Ministry, hosted by Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, CA. His program teaches young adult African American men personal development skills and brings hope and positivity to their lives.

Or,

- Nicole Trotter, a former actor who worked as a Christian educator and family ministry director before coming to SFTS. In 2015, she earned her M.Div. and received the David Esler Award in Homiletics for preaching. This summer Nicole was installed as Pastor at St. Luke Presbyterian Church in San Rafael, CA.

Or,

- D.Min. student Rabbi Mona Decker, Chaplain at Community Hospice of Northeast Florida, who works with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s patients. By using what’s at hand—symbols that are spiritually based, scenes of home or places in which the person finds meaning, or pictures of family and friends—Rabbi Decker finds a way to comfort those who aren’t able to ask for what they need. For her dissertation, Rabbi Decker will hold focus groups, interviews, and teaching sessions with hospice chaplains to explore the different tools of spiritual care.

I could go on. SFTS students and graduates are truly impressive as persons and in terms of their ministries. I am grateful to be a part of this work of transforming theological education, and I am deeply thankful to each of you for your steady and faithful support of the Seminary. Because of you, we are able to do this amazing thing. Whatever we have achieved, it is because God has been mightily at work in, through, and around us.

In this season of Advent, hope is being rekindled here, in campus programs and in the hearts of faculty, staff, and students. In this crazy and confused world, we are opening ourselves anew to receive the gift of God’s love for the world in Jesus Christ.

Advent blessings and a very Merry Christmas!

Yours in Christ,



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



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