

# AUDEMUS

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

March 2016

Dear Friends,

A lot is changing at SFTS. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said, “change is the only constant in life.” This we know, no matter how much we might want otherwise. Yes, not all change is welcome, because sometimes it means the loss of someone we treasure and esteem. And sometimes change asks us to accept that we are walking in uncharted territory, making a path where there seems to be no path. Yet as followers of Jesus, we know that change is at the heart of our faith. Jesus’ call bids us to leave behind what is familiar and comfortable in order to find what is ultimate and eternal. In this Lenten season, we are on that path.

In the category of unwelcome change is the untimely death of **James Noel**, SFTS Professor of African American Christianity on January 31. Professor Noel was a powerful presence on campus, in the classroom, and in the pulpit for nearly 30 years. He mentored countless students, many of whom also testify to the way he changed their lives and transformed their ministries. You can find our press release that celebrates the life and accomplishments of Dr. Noel at <http://www.sfts.edu/james-anthony-noel-1948-2016-prophet-pastor-professor-and-painter/>

So, too, we will feel the loss of **Beth Liebert**, SFTS Professor of Christian Spirituality, who will retire this summer after 30 years on the faculty. Building on her predecessors Roy Fairchild, Howard Rice, and others, Professor Liebert has been instrumental in establishing the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction (DASD) as a premier, groundbreaking course of study and practice within theological education. SFTS was a pioneer in Christian Spirituality, long before other seminaries began to add it to their curricula. The depth and sophistication of the SFTS approach to spirituality, spiritual formation, and spiritual direction is still unmatched by any other Protestant seminary. Graduates of our program now head such programs in other institutions or serve as spiritual directors in many different settings.

The loss of these members of the SFTS faculty is deeply felt by their colleagues, their students, and the hundreds of alumni who benefited from their deep faith commitments and scholarly pursuits in service to the church and its ministries.

Since my arrival here, I have come to deeply appreciate the gifts of intellect, faith, creativity, collegiality, humor, steadiness, resilience, devotion to the church, and high-level teaching abilities in each of the SFTS faculty. It is a profound privilege and joy for me to be a part of this engaging and lively community of teacher/scholars. I have seen each of them in the classroom and marveled at their ability to draw students out, encourage critical thinking, consider fresh perspectives, and entertain alternative explanations. I have seen them in various meetings take a considered approach to a question or issue, and listen respectfully to their colleagues even when they disagree. This is truly a learning community as well as a teaching one!

On the positive side of the change ledger, we will be welcoming two new faculty later this year. It is still too early for me to tell you about one of them since the appointment has not yet come before the Trustees for final approval. But this young scholar is amazing and will bring vitality and excitement to her teaching as a professor of Old Testament. Stay tuned!

The other person who will join the faculty is Dr. **Wendy Farley**, a distinguished systematic theologian who comes to us from Emory University, where she has been a member of the faculty since 1988. Dr. Farley has written extensively on women theologians and mystics, religious dialogue, classical texts, contemporary ethical issues, and contemplative practices. Her seminal book, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*, has long been required reading in SFTS Professor Greg Love’s course on God and Human Suffering.

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In recent years, however, Dr. Farley's scholarly work has focused increasingly on Spirituality and that is what has brought her to SFTS. The author of many books and articles, her most recent recent book, *The Thirst of God: Contemplating God's Love with Three Women Mystics* (Westminster John Knox, 2015) explores the spirituality of medieval mystics Marguerite Porete, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich. Dr. Farley's widely used text *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Westminster John Knox, 2011) offers a powerful expression of Jesus Christ as experienced by the marginalized and persecuted. We are thrilled to be adding such a premier theologian to our faculty. Her approach to Spirituality promises to build on our rich tradition of groundbreaking approaches to this distinctive feature of an SFTS education.

On February 1 we welcomed Rev. **Floyd Thompkins** as the first full-time Director of the Center for Innovation in Ministry. For the past 15 years, Floyd has pursued a ministry of empowerment for at-risk youth and young adults in rural South Georgia. Among his many accomplishments, Rev. Thompkins served as Associate Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University and then Stanford University. While at Stanford, he founded Black Church, the largest multi-cultural religious gathering on the campus.

We are very excited about Floyd's decision to bring his passion and call to ministry to SFTS. His deep Christian faith, boundless energy, powerful communication skills, and creative, entrepreneurial spirit promise to draw together a whole host of unlikely partners for conversation, collaboration, and experimentation designed to increase the Church's capacity to respond faithfully to the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century.

And thus our Lenten journey continues, a journey that will take us to the foot of the Cross and which bids us to lose our lives for Jesus' sake and the gospel's. The God we worship is forever making all things new, including us, including this seminary. We are learning again, as if for the first time, how to be followers of Jesus.

In this Lenten season, may you be filled with the richest of blessings from the God of Love.



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

P.S. – Thank you for your steady prayers and generous support of SFTS across the years! Please be in touch! You can call me at 415.451.2810. That's my direct line. In the next letter, I'll bring you an update on our strategic planning.



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