

AUDEMUS

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

April 2016

Dear Friends,

San Francisco Theological Seminary has “a goodly heritage” (Psalm 16:6). But what of our future? Is there still a place for SFTS in the landscape of theological education as we move into the 21st century? Is theological education still needed in our time? And if so, what *kind* of theological education, and for whom? These are basic questions, and every seminary should be asking them.

First, let’s talk about the need for theological education as the future unfolds. We are now living in the digital age, where access to information has increased geometrically, if not astronomically. Type the word “salvation” into your computer search engine and you’ll get 88.5 million results in less than a second. (I am not making this up.) Or, google (a verb that is now part of our vocabulary) the question “why do we suffer?” and you will receive 176 million results in .64 seconds. Or enter the phrase “interpretations of Genesis 22” – the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac – and you will get nearly 3 million results in one second. Seminaries used to be repositories of theological learning. But if seminaries are simply places for the storage and transmission of information, then seminaries now have been replaced by the Internet.

Personally, I would argue that seminaries are no longer primarily information-imparting agencies. Rather, the critical function of every seminary is theological and analytical – opening the minds of students to a way of thinking about life and the world in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Seminaries are all about reflection and engagement. We structure the engagement of students with texts, ancient and modern; with each other in worship, prayer, and community; and with the world in all its complexity, confusion, beauty and ugliness. And, there is something beneficial as well in the *sustained* engagement of students with a curriculum, a faculty, and a community over a period of time. And we know: people are changed by an SFTS education.

At SFTS we engage our students so that they can engage others. We equip them by supporting and challenging them to think deeply and expansively about the meaning of faith and life, of God and humanity. We design our educational experience so that it will be transformative for our students. In turn we expect them to become transformational leaders in ministries of justice, peace and healing.

Seminaries have also served as credentialing agencies for professional ministers. This is how most people think of seminaries today. But this is becoming more problematic with each passing decade. With the exponential growth of Pentecostal churches, and the rise of new forms of worshipping communities without denominational ties, a significant and growing proportion of U.S. congregations do not require their clergy or religious leadership to be seminary graduates.

Moreover, a growing number of those who are in ministry today, whether they have been ordained or not, find it virtually impossible to go to seminary as it is currently configured. In some cases, the issue is cost – to relocate, forfeit a current job, or take on additional debt. In others, it is a lack of an undergraduate degree or a language barrier. The high barriers to seminary education that currently exist, together with the lowering of educational requirements needed for ministry, are making seminary education seem superfluous. “Maybe we really don’t need an educated clergy,” many people say. “We just need people with certain skill sets and a pleasing personality.”

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

Even the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which has historically touted an educated clergy as one of its hallmarks, is feeling the pinch and contributing to the trend away from the value of an educated clergy. In the PC(USA), an M.Div. degree is currently necessary, but not sufficient for ordination. Beyond the degree, ministerial candidates must meet additional standards for ordination. At the same time, more and more presbyteries are designing do-it-yourself credentialing for commissioned ruling elders and placing them in congregations that are unable to afford a full-time minister. There is a significant disparity between the education required of an ordained teaching elder and a commissioned ruling elder.

These trends are giving more weight to the idea that particular skills and training should be the core content of seminary education. In a recent blog for *The Huffington Post* (Feb. 12, 2016), Phillip Clayton, a theology professor at Claremont School of Theology, wrote “We need nothing less than a new system for credentialing religious and community leaders.”

Clayton goes on to note that “certification of skills plays a major role in the workplace today—mostly because the needs are changing so rapidly that traditional education can’t keep up. Why should ministry be different? Here also we need a broad range of certificates for specific skills. Individual certifications will then be grouped or “stacked” together. People will be credentialed when they have amassed the right combination of certified skills for a particular kind of work.”

In Clayton’s view, seminaries should “reboot theological education” by (*emphasis added*):

- focusing on programs that *train* leaders for the needs of the 21st century—in whatever context those needs might manifest
- considering different educational models that emphasize *practical applications*, contextual learning, non-traditional contexts, and *along-the-way credentialing*
- *constructing new credentialing programs for lay ministers, non-English-speaking candidates, and those without external financial support*
- providing these services in ways that are financially sustainable

And so we are back to defining theological education. Is it primarily theological in nature, a process of learning to think critically and expansively about faith and life, God and humanity? Or is it about training and skill development? How important is the credentialing process? To whom is credentialing important?

We are now midway through the process of updating the SFTS strategic plan. As the process has unfolded, the questions What is theological education, and Why is it needed now in the digital age, have been front and center. But a second set of equally important questions has surfaced as well. Who are our prospective students? Who are the people we think ought to be engaged in theological education? Who is it who needs the kind of education that SFTS has to offer? It is these questions to which I will turn in my next *Audemus* letter.

In this season of Easter, we celebrate the power of God’s love to roll away the stone of death and free us for eternal life in Christ.

And as we seek to discern the risen Christ in our midst, may our hearts be filled with joy at each discovery.



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

P.S. – I am so grateful for your heartfelt prayers and generous support, faithfully rendered. Thank you! If you haven’t been to the SFTS website recently, you should! It’s been wonderfully upgraded and is now more accessible than ever. Visit www.sfts.edu



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