

AUDEMUS

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

NOVEMBER 2016

Dear Friends,

More than 30 years ago, Henri Nouwen and friends wrote: *“Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.”*¹

At SFTS we’re in the business of teaching compassion. We draw on the resources of the Christian faith to teach our students how to be more compassionate, and in turn how to teach others the same.

Take 2006 SFTS graduate and Distinguished Alum, Rev. Allison Harrington, for example. Allison is the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, 60 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Week after week, she and her congregation come face to face with the men, women, and children who have risked their lives and crossed the border to escape violence, hunger, and poverty. At times that meant supporting humanitarian patrols into the desert to place gallon water jugs along migrant paths so fewer would die from thirst. In 2014, her congregation began to provide sanctuary to immigrants facing deportation. Sanctuary, Harrington says, “is about Christian hospitality; it is about loving our neighbors; it is about caring for widows and orphans enough to act before they become widows and orphans; at its core sanctuary is about being a Christian,” says Harrington, citing the nation’s broken immigration policy, which tears apart families and sends people back to places where their lives are threatened. “When Jesus says, ‘I was a stranger, and you welcomed me’—we don’t see that as a metaphor.” In these acts of compassion, Allison Harrington is practicing her Christian faith.

The world is in a profound state of turmoil. Fear abounds. People are suffering. We have toxic leaders, dysfunctional systems, and a politically polarized church and society. Increasingly, the world, riven by hostility and fear, seems intent on building walls to separate people one from another. We must also acknowledge that religion itself too often contributes in a negative, harmful way to the pain and suffering rife in the land. The state of the world is a call for compassion. It’s a call for the church to be a sign of hope, a place of acceptance and love, a catalyst for peace, healing, and justice.

At SFTS we believe that religion – and specifically Christian faith – should be a positive force for good in the world. It should make the world a better place, not just for some, but for everyone. No exceptions. That means focusing the educational experience on the challenge of deepening the world’s capacity for compassion.

We provide unique, effective educational opportunities for people from all walks of life, people who want to learn how to care for people who are suffering, whether from a life crisis, a dysfunctional family, systemic injustices, or historic patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

At SFTS we embrace an educational approach that moves iteratively between action and reflection. We expect our students to be engaged in some form of work that seeks to engage with people who are suffering, and we ask our students to engage in serious self-reflection about their experiences. We teach them critical thinking skills that consider the cultural and historical contexts and the power dynamics and social location of our personal stories. We believe that important, life-giving wisdom resides with those

1. Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, 1982.

who have experienced the trauma, harm, and indignity of oppression, exclusion, and injustice. And that that wisdom provides the basis for creative solutions to seemingly intractable problems and dysfunctional, exploitative systems.

We are a Presbyterian institution, grounded in the Reformed tradition, which means that we read the Bible as a life-giving, God-revealing, humanity-liberating sacred text. And we practice intellectual rigor, expansive social inclusion, and a hopeful, loving engagement with the world. These values and this orientation to learning provide the foundation for what we do and encourage us to practice compassion.

As a founding member of the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, SFTS offers our students the ability to expand their capacity for compassion even further, because the GTU is interdisciplinary and interreligious. Through the GTU, students engage with people from other faith traditions and cultures, other life experiences, and other ways of seeing the world.

Our approach to spirituality combines head and heart, prayer and public witness, ancient practices and contemporary experimentation across many faith traditions. Forty years ago, the faculty of SFTS made a conscious decision to bring spirituality into the curriculum. Since then, we have led the way among Protestant seminaries in emphasizing spirituality as central to living one's faith, as the way to put compassion and the pursuit of social justice into practice in one's ministry.

The Center for Innovation in Ministry is a further expression of SFTS's commitment to be on the growing edge of new life for the church in today's world. The Center not only educates for innovation in ministry, it engages in ministry as it educates. It's a place to learn by doing that characterizes the entire SFTS experience.

At SFTS we produce religious leaders who are equipped to foster common action and uncommon community among people and groups that do not know each other, do not understand each other and do not agree with each other. At SFTS we educate religious leaders who are capable of creating more compassion in the world — through their personal example and thoughtful, wise engagement in their workplaces and communities.

SFTS has been around for 145 years. But we are looking to the future, listening for God's voice, and seeking to serve a world that longs for wholeness, community, dignity, and peace. That's why we focus on teaching compassion.

Happy Thanksgiving! And may your Advent yearnings for the coming of our Savior grow larger and stronger by the day.

Grace and peace to you,



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

P.S. – A wonderful group of SFTS trustees has stepped forward with a commitment to match dollar for dollar every new gift or increase in giving for SFTS this year. I hope you will prayerfully consider how much you might be able to contribute to strengthen our capacity to bring the compassion of Jesus Christ to a hurting world. Thank you!



San Francisco
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In Christ. A New Creation.