

AUDEMUS

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

December 2014

Dear Friends,

Greetings in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ!

My letter this month is focused on the unique character of an SFTS education. But before I delve into my subject, let me share this:

As it has every year for the last 40 years, SFTS gathered for a Service of Lessons and Carols on the first Friday and Saturday of December. In 1974, David Esler, a professor of preaching, and Wilbur Russell, a professor of church music, instituted this special service, following the venerable tradition established by King's College Chapel, Cambridge, England in 1918. In each case the motivation was the same: to bring a more imaginative approach to worship and to engage a wider audience in the message and meaning of Christmas. The King's College Christmas Eve services were first broadcast across the world in 1928 and now reach millions. At SFTS the congregation that gathers includes many from the larger community in the Bay Area.

As Christmas Day approaches, it is my deepest prayer that the disciplines and delights of this Advent season have worked their magic and prepared your hearts afresh to receive God's astounding gift of love, given in the Bethlehem Christ Child.

Now to our subject. Here at SFTS we are committed to growing our enrollment. This goal drives us not because we think "big is better," but because we believe we have an exceptional and valuable educational product to offer. Time and again, students have said to me, unsolicited, that they love the education they are receiving and are grateful for the community they experience here that both challenges and supports them.

We have an outstanding, thought-leading faculty, who are dedicated to our students and to teaching, learning, and challenging the status quo. Their expertise builds students' abilities in critical thinking and judgment.

Here students learn their Bible. They learn how to think theologically and "do theology." Their education is not so much about spiritual formation as it is about intellectual, emotional, and spiritual expansion. They are stretched rather than molded. Hands-on community and congregational experiences help students confront the real issues of ministry as they learn to create solutions that work in the world they serve.

This fall, as part of our new M.Div. curriculum, we instituted Wednesday morning interdisciplinary lectures. This has turned out to be such an exciting innovation. Every Wednesday the community gathers – every faculty member, including me, along with students and staff. Across the semester, each professor, including me, has made a presentation from his or her own discipline or area of interest on that topic. It's stimulating,

informative, fascinating, and inspiring – and it’s building a fresh sense of community. This fall the topic was “Spirituality,” In the spring we’ll focus on “A New Creation.”

SFTS is committed to being a diverse, open, and inclusive community. We celebrate the multiplicity of ideas, lifestyles, and perspectives in the wider world, and welcome students from every faith tradition. About half our students are Presbyterian; the rest come from diverse religious backgrounds and viewpoints. In recent D.Min. classes, there are three Jewish rabbis, a Muslim imam, 11 Roman Catholic priests and lay leaders, a Pentecostal bishop, and pastors, chaplains, educators, community organizers, and lay leaders from more than a dozen different Protestant denominations. Over and over we see that experiencing different cultures and theological perspectives in service to enhancing practices of ministry enlarges a student’s capacity for compassion and re-energizes their passion for justice, healing, and peace.

Our strong, abiding relationship with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley adds immeasurably to the possibilities for intellectual and cultural enrichment. The GTU is the largest and most diverse partnership of seminaries and graduate schools in the United States. Like SFTS, the GTU is dedicated to building bridges within and across different religious traditions. It offers education for academic and religious leadership within a unique ecumenical and interreligious context. The GTU works collaboratively with the University of California, Berkeley, and is the home of the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library, one of the largest theological libraries in the country.

SFTS Board chair Marion Stanton and I also serve on the Board of the GTU. At their meeting in late October, the GTU Board strongly endorsed a plan presented by President Riess Potterveld that includes eight different initiatives to expand the academic centers and programs of the GTU. These initiatives include measures to create endowed faculty positions and programs focused on the Hindu, Sikh, and Jain religious traditions, Mormon Studies, and Buddhist traditions outside of Japan. These new directions will complement the hallmark GTU programs and degree offerings in Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Studies. Recognizing the significance and uniqueness of the GTU’s academic programs, the Board unanimously affirmed its enthusiastic ongoing commitment to a robust doctoral program that is ecumenical, interreligious, and interdisciplinary. SFTS students can cross-register for any course offered by the GTU. It is an integral part of what SFTS is and offers.

I think it is safe to say that among the Presbyterian seminaries, SFTS offers a *unique* educational experience, one that cannot be found anywhere else. We are academically rigorous: we ask our students to stop and think, not stop thinking. And we provide a rich learning environment that encourages our graduates to think innovatively about ministry, venture into challenging contexts, and serve God’s purposes with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

I am humbled and grateful to be part of such an astounding, high quality institution.
Peace and joy to you in this Christmas season,



Jim McDonald

P.S. – I am deeply appreciative of the many ways you have offered your prayers and encouragement for our efforts to create a new kind of seminary for the 21st century. Thank you!



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