

AUDEMUS

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

November 2015

Dear Friends,

November. The days are shortening, the darkness deepening. The air contains a chill. We still have our glorious days—crisp, invigorating, the brilliance of the landscape painted with dazzling color that delights the eye. Even so, we know: winter is on its way.

On November 1, Catholic and Protestant Christians throughout the world celebrated All Saints' Day. It's one of the Church's older observances; a day set aside when the church remembers and gives thanks to God for its saints and martyrs down through the centuries, that great cloud of witnesses urging us on. Winter's long death is bracketed by our Easter proclamation of God's gift of eternal life and, on All Saints' Day, our rejoicing in those who have accepted it.

On All Saints' Day, our image of the church becomes enlarged, so that we think not simply in terms of potlucks and programs; pastors and pledges; or buildings, budgets, and basketball leagues; not simply in terms of the here and now, or of that which may be seen and touched, but in terms of the invisible and untouchable; the 10,000 times 10,000 in the world unseen, whose faith lives on in our hearts, whose knowledge lights our paths, and whose tasks have now fallen to our hands.

For Christians, resurrection is not a concept to be celebrated once a year at Easter. It is not even solely a season of the year. It's a reality to be experienced in and out of season, in moments of darkness, despair, suffering, and death. Resurrection is the power of God at work in the world, a power stronger than death itself. It breaks through the hard places, it heals the broken places, and it transforms the impossible into something brand new, magnificent and beautiful. Resurrection declares that we belong to God, who is love, and nothing can separate us from that love. Nothing.

Resurrection faith animates our work for San Francisco Theological Seminary. We know the Seminary has lived through difficult times, but we are far from dead, much less dying. We have opened ourselves afresh to God's love in Jesus Christ, and good things are happening. The new student village has a global demographic, with kids from several continents gleefully playing together on late afternoons, reminding us that we are one human family in God's economy. The interfaith composition of our D.Min. courses provides fertile territory for exploring ideas for creative ministry in diverse settings. Faculty presentations at our Wednesday morning interdisciplinary lectures on "Healing" spark the imagination and challenge our assumptions on an important topic. We are embracing Paul's declaration that "in Christ, there is a New Creation."

We know, too, that the world is in turmoil. As Charles Dickens once wrote, 'It is the best of times and the worst of times, the age of wisdom and the age of foolishness, the epoch of belief and the epoch of incredulity, the season of Light and the season of Darkness, the spring of hope and the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.' How could Dickens have seen so clearly what the world would be like in 2015?

And so we are asking ourselves, what is the new thing that God is doing in the world now, and how can we be a part of it? What is the future to which God is calling us?

The Trustees have embarked on a process to shape the next iteration of SFTS's Strategic Plan. The Board affirmed the overall direction of the Seminary and authorized a new planning process that would build on the initiatives begun under the 2013 Strategic Plan. They asked that the process be streamlined in order to strengthen our efforts and focus our resources on our key goals related to enrollment and long-term financial sustainability.

Board Chair Marion Stanton appointed a committee to design and steer the process. The committee is Ken Henderson (chair), Adlai Amor, Jana Childers, Ernie Jackson, Greg Love, Marion Stanton, Mary Lynn Tobin, Steve Wirth, and me. The faculty, the Board, and the Seminary's administrative cabinet are already engaged. Other constituencies will also be involved as we move forward.

Perhaps the most important questions we have been asking are: what differentiates SFTS? What makes this seminary unique and valuable? The Strategic Planning Committee was struck that the 2013 statement about this is still worthy of pursuit. Here's what was said then:

Compared to graduates of other seminaries, SFTS graduates will be better prepared and more willing to do the work of revitalizing churches in transition, growing stagnant congregations, and experimenting with different forms and formats of church and community ministry. They will be grounded in the Bible, able to think critically, called to social action and able to bridge divides. In addition, they will have a broader repertoire of ideas and skills, especially skills that are essential for bringing people together to do God's work, skills such as: inspirational and transformational worship, Christian spiritual development, community-based and mission-oriented ministry, managing congregational dynamics, and effective Christian education.

The seminary will cultivate such skills and abilities for the kind of leadership needed for growing vital, mission-oriented faith communities in diverse, challenging settings in the context of providing an academically rigorous education in the Reformed tradition.

So here's my question to you: What do you think differentiates SFTS from other seminaries, theological schools, divinity schools, and university departments of religion? Can you identify three attributes of an SFTS education that are (or should become) uniquely ours?

You can send your replies to audemus@sfts.edu. I will read and share them with the Strategic Planning Committee.

Yours in Christ,



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

P.S. Send your responses by December 1 to be included in the materials for the next meeting of the Strategic Planning Committee. And thank you for your joyful, generous, and steadfast support for SFTS. I am so grateful for your prayers and good wishes.



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