

The President's Memorandum

To: RPTS Friends and Alumni
From: Jerry O'Neill
Date: Fall 2016

A few weeks ago a first-year student sat at our family's dining room table explaining what he appreciated most about his seminary training. He said, in essence, that he had learned solid Reformed theology and helpful ministry skills; but more than that, he had learned how to think, how to pray, and how to persevere under trial. In just a few words this man summarized the experience of many of our students who have come to realize that what they learn in the classroom is only a part of their overall training for ministry.

The paragraph above was written twenty years ago this month in my correspondence to friends of the Seminary—friends like you. And what I can say to you now is that it sounds very much like what we hear from our students today. Even as much has changed at the Seminary over the years, by His grace in a very real sense (to quote King Solomon), *there is nothing new under the sun.*

In my opening remarks at Orientation this year, I compared what we do here to a three-legged stool, with each leg being essential in the training of those who feel called to serve in some aspect of the work of the church. The first leg, which is the reason most of our students come to seminary, is the cognitive—the theology, the teaching of the classroom. The second leg is ministry skills development—the preaching skills, the counseling skills, the teaching skills necessary to effective service in Christ's kingdom. It's not enough for the servants of the Lord to have their theology right, they must also be able to impart what they know to others, both in the public and private ministry of the Word.

But orthodoxy and competency are still not enough for leaders of Christ's church. In fact, it could be argued that the third leg of the stool is even more basic, more central to effective ministry than the first two. The third leg of the stool is Christlikeness—personal godliness, being increasingly conformed to the image of our Savior. Who we are in Christ is ultimately more important than what we do for Christ.

By God's grace, these three legs of theological education continue to be the bedrock of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary. We pray for faithfulness. We pray for wisdom. We pray that the fruit of God's Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—would mark all we do. And God has answered our prayers. He is working with weak vessels to be sure, jars of clay; but may it be that in our weakness He proves Himself strong, and glorious!

A Great Summer

- ❖ Those of you who get our electronic newsletters already know that the high point of the summer for us was the overwhelming election by our Synod of Professor Barry York to

be the next President of the Seminary, effective July 1, 2018.

Let me repeat the effective date, July 1, 2018. Regardless of how we say it, many people still think that I either retired last summer or will retire in the summer of 2017. However, if the Lord provides health and strength, the transition will be in the summer of 2018.

- ❖ The Theological Foundations for Youth (TFY) program was a grand success again this summer. Under the leadership of David and June Whitla and Rut and Evelyn Etheridge, this theological program for high school students has flourished over the years. Thirty-two students, having just completed their junior year in high school, filled Rutherford Hall (our main campus building) for times of feasting on God's Word, feasting on God's provision for daily bread (if you can call all that food "daily bread"), fellowship, and fun.

Our TFY program began in 1999 when Lilly Endowment approached us about offering a theological program for some of our brightest students in the hope that the Lord would use this to turn some young men toward pastoral ministry. Then Board President William Edgar drew up the initial proposal, with an assist from Librarian Tom Reid. Lilly liked the program and funded the initial years. The rest, as they say, is history.

Whether or not the initial goals of the Lilly Endowment have been fully realized, it would appear that TFY has been effective in getting and/or keeping our covenant young people involved in the work of the church. And several students who attended TFY have, indeed, enrolled at the Seminary.

- ❖ A number of our Seminary staff were involved in the Reformed Presbyterian International Conference in July. Professor Barry York was the keynote speaker, and he did a marvelous job. Several of us conducted workshops, including the President and Vice President of our Board (Michael LeFebvre and Rich Holdeman), Mark and Sharon Sampson, Don Reed, and my wife, Ann, and me.

Sharon Sampson stole the show at the talent night with a parody about the Seminary to the tune YMCA. She had people rocking in the aisles! A studio version of the parody is available at <http://s.rpts.edu/RPTSp parody>.

Additionally, Adjunct Professor Bruce Backensto was the Program Director. His wife, Kim, long-time Development Assistant at the Seminary, served as one of the registrars. Together, they had a lot do in making the conference all that it was.

- ❖ Our REmaker Work Conference, in its second year after nearly being cancelled at one point, was a grand success. According to Mark Sampson, there were 57 individual projects accomplished during the week.

Next year's REmaker Work Conference is scheduled for June 19-23, 2017. Whether you are a skilled craftsman, or an interested but unskilled worker, we hope you will mark these dates on your calendar. We can definitely use you!

A Great Fall Quarter

- ❖ Midterms are over as I write this Memorandum; and by the time it arrives in your mail box, students will probably be studying for final examinations. On a quarter system, at least for us, the week before Thanksgiving is always the week of finals.
- ❖ This has been a good quarter for us in many ways. Students are eager to be here, eager to learn, and there is plenty of evidence that they like one another—which I should stress is the usual, by God’s grace! We had 60 people at our quarterly FEAST (Friends Eating AT Seminary Tables), which is simply a covered dish dinner before evening class early in the quarter. That is by far the record for such an informal gathering—but it set the standard for future FEAST gatherings.
- ❖ The sense of community is enhanced with several fairly large families living in the area. We love having wives and kids come for chapel, or FEAST, or for any other reason—as long as the kids are supervised!

One man, who is the commissioned pastor of an EPC congregation in eastern New York, commutes weekly to his classes. His dear wife decided after being here the first week of school with him, to quit her job (with two week notice), and commute with him just to be a part of what he is experiencing here. Such things strengthen marriages, but they also strengthen the community.

Ultimate Frisbee, soccer, Psalm sings, and prayer meetings are all aspects of community life. Our daily chapel services provide opportunities to worship our great God together while at the same time strengthening the fellowship we enjoy with one another in Christ.

- ❖ Student enrollment is up this year. We rejoice in the quality of those the Lord has sent us. I had not expected to have an increase in numbers this year so the Lord’s kindness to us in this regard is especially pleasing.
- ❖ Part of the reason for the increase in numbers is related to our Distance Learning program. This program has added the kind of flexibility that certain of our students need to have in order to get theological training.

Our entire Master of Theological Studies (MTS) program is now available via Distance Learning. One year of the MDiv can now be taken via Distance Learning; and in some exceptional cases involving exceptional students and involved pastors, a second year may be taken from a distance.

- ❖ Our annual Westminster Conference was on the theme of God’s providence. It was a great conference with approximately ninety people in attendance. Each of the presentations will be available very soon in the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Journal. You can access this at <http://rpts.edu/alumni.html> (Resources).

This and That

- ❖ For the first time ever, we are making all of our **in-class courses** available for audit for just \$99 per course. This provides a wonderful opportunity for those who live in the area to take advantage of some great teaching at an unbeatable price. Elders, deacons, and all serious-minded believers should seriously consider this opportunity. For those **at a distance**, the same tuition applies, but there is a content delivery fee that would more than double the total cost. Still, it is far more affordable than ever before.
- ❖ Jordan Feagley, our new Assistant Librarian, is using his gifts to make the Library website far more accessible and user friendly. It gives us the framework to add more digital resources in the future. It will ultimately be a big help for our distance learners.
- ❖ Dr. George Scipione continues an active travel schedule. Brazil, the Czech Republic, California, Chicago, and Indianapolis are recent stops. Dr. Scipione, a founding member of what is now known as the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC), reflected at their recent annual meeting about the past forty years of the movement. His buddy and a friend of many of us, Dr. Richard Ganz, was with him at the conference, and participated in the same panel discussion.
- ❖ Adjunct Professor Bruce Backensto has made two recent trips to East Asia, and he lectured for thirteen ninety-minute classes at Bridgewater College in Nairobi, Kenya.
- ❖ Our Self-Study Report for our re-accreditation is done. Many thanks to Sharon Sampson for countless hours of tireless work on this very important project! The visiting team is scheduled to be here March 27-30, 2017. Please pray for their visit.

Increasingly, in this era when many seminaries are struggling to get students and/or balance the budget, re-accreditation has often been granted for a period of five to seven years, instead of the more usual period of ten years of past years. This is especially true for schools going through a presidential transition. But please pray that we are granted a ten-year extension. We believe that by God's grace, we are on solid footing, and we really don't want to go through another review in five, or even seven, years.

- ❖ The Strike the Match campaign resulted in a total of \$218,000 for the week. We are thankful to the Lord for this provision, and we also thank each of you who gave. More than 300 donors contributed; and we hope that with each gift, a prayer for the Seminary was offered. I am reminded every day that is not by might, or by power, but by the Spirit of God that the work of the Seminary continues to prosper.

Even with the successful Strike the Match campaign, it will take strong year-end giving to balance the budget this year. As you are able, please give again before the end of the year. And please continue to pray for us.