

An interview with PTS President Gary Peluso-Verdend on the seminary's new identity and mission statements. Originally broadcast on July 12, 2012, Public Radio Tulsa, KWGS.

Identity Statement:

Phillips Theological Seminary offers theological education dedicated to learning the way of Jesus in order to cultivate vital communities, vital conversations, and the public good.

Mission Statement:

The seminary's mission is to learn and teach how to be: attentive to God; responsible biblical and theological interpreters; faithful individuals and communities acting with God to transform the world.

Why did you change the mission statement?

Two reasons. First, I've heard for years that our mission statement was too generic, "preparing women and men for varied Christian ministries." Nearly all seminaries could say that. We looked for language that was more specific to what we do at PTS, language that might not be unique to PTS but would highlight more of what makes us distinctive. Second, PTS is positioning itself to be a seminary that takes lay education seriously, in addition to education for clergy candidates. We looked for words that include both laity and prospective clergy. "Ministry" language should not be understood as exclusive to ministries of the ordained but it is often understood as exclusive.

Many seminaries these days are using leadership language, as in "we're preparing leaders for the church." I note that the PTS statements don't use leadership language.

Correct. The disciplines of leadership are woven into the phrases of that statement. Rather than saying "we educate leaders," we decided to name the core practices of faithfully following in Jesus' way that are also essential for leaders. What must leaders do? Learn to attend and to teach others to attend to God, through study and prayer and listening. Learn to reason with the scholars and how to read context in order to interpret responsibly. Faithful communities acting with God to transform the world require leaders. In addition, some prospective students hope to be equipped to be better followers and influencers rather than leaders per se; and we hope they will see room for themselves in PTS's programs.

What is an identity statement?

The identity statement, when joined with the new mission statement, should give prospective students and friends a good idea of who PTS is and what we do. Not all theological education fosters the same experience. Catholic theological education is different from independent evangelical education. The way revelation, evidence, and truth claims are handled in traditions that work within confessional boundaries is different from a liberal arts method in which conversation, following the arguments where they lead, and a mutually critical dialogue between theology and the social sciences may lead to conclusions that fall outside of creedal boundaries.

Why did the seminary choose to use the phrase “way of Jesus”?

Several reasons. First, PTS is a seminary of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Jesus is THE historical figure with which Christians of ALL stripes must answer the question, “Who do you say that he is?” Second, in the Book of Acts the Jesus movement was known as “the Way.” Third, the PTS student body is comprised of theological positions shaped by a diversity of theological convictions, from evangelical Christian to Unitarian; and “learning the way of Jesus” sets a conversation table at which all can sit. Fourth, contemporary Jesus scholarship has fruitfully contrasted “the way of Jesus” with “the way of Caesar” in recent decades. Scholars have reminded us that the entire New Testament is written in the midst of the Roman Empire. Understanding what the way of Jesus meant in the first century context, whether in contrast to Roman or in comparison with other Jewish options of the day, is essential work as we work in this century to be faithful followers.

What is the intent between tying “the way of Jesus” to “vital communities, vital conversations, and the public good”?

Jesus of Nazareth offered a way of faith and practice for how to love God and neighbor, rather than a new religion. Practicing that way, in local communities and in larger publics, aligns communities with a holy well-spring of vitality—or so that is our Christian claim.

Tell us about the emphasis on vital communities, vital conversations, and the public good?

For me, one of the most exciting components of the plan is the attention to identifying, investigating, forming relationships with, and promoting vital communities and vital conversations. Communities will include Christian congregations, congregations of other faiths, non-profits, and other forms of association. In Fall 2012, the faculty will begin what promises to be an energetic, evocative set of conversations; and we expect these conversations to eventuate in a curriculum that will help our students imagine how to envision and promote vitality wherever they serve.