

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Luncheon Address by Phillips Theological Seminary President Gary Peluso-Verdend, delivered at the luncheon for PTS alums and friends

Robert Fulgrim's *It Was on Fire When I Laid Down on It* was the title essay in his book from 20 years ago. In the opening story, he tells about a small-town fire department called because smoke was pouring from a home's window. The fire fighters found a man lying on a smoldering bed. After rescuing him and dousing the bed, the man was asked what happened. His reply: "I don't know. It was on fire when I laid down on it."

With two new presidential appointments at Disciples seminaries in the past month, I am now the second most senior Disciples seminary president. ☺ And while the circumstances of Christian Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary, and Phillips Theological Seminary are different, all three of us newbie presidents might say about our schools, "It was on fire when I lay down on it."

We at PTS have been spared the worst--presently. The fires burning through the economy and culture and the North American Christian world have caused minor damage at some seminaries and devastation at others. At PTS we feel the heat and smell smoke. There have been some embers falling on the roof that needed attention. And the fires are not out—far from it; and no school can escape the fires of change in which we all live and move and have our institutional being. It is also the case that mainline denominations are raising fundamental questions about what seminaries are for and what are the fitting programs today to educate for ministry. So, despite the fact that PTS has been spared the worst thus far, I have a sense of urgency for the seminary to continue the change work we've begun.

Critics within churches have declared seminaries are too expensive, elite, and listening to the wrong audiences. One reads these criticisms from critics in every denomination. And with the statistical standards of educational attainment of the pastorate falling, and with fewer congregations that can afford a full time seminary-educated clergyperson, the critics are getting louder.

You know I am an insider outsider at PTS, a United Methodist leading a Disciples seminary. [I will always appreciate the Disciples, for you are ecumenical by conviction rather than by convenience, which my own denomination sometimes evidences.] As an inside outsider, I need to say: You should ask more of your seminaries.

I appreciate and affirm the four Disciples denominational priorities:

- To be a pro reconciliation/anti-racism church;
- Transform 1000 congregations;
- Start 1000 congregations;
- Leadership development to support the work of church transformation and starts.

Some other denominations are kicking Disciples' butts in terms of having a national strategy, the state of board and agency cooperation, and an integrated vision/communications plan for church transformation, new church starts, and non-seminary degree educational programs for congregational leaders. I have hope in the Hope Partnership. I'll be contacting the leaders after the assembly on the behalf of PTS to say, "I'm thrilled that seminaries were mentioned at your dinner presentation. I want to know how PTS can be involved."

One of the areas in which seminaries can help is in terms of assessing the outcomes of educational programs. Based on all the time the seminary's faculty has devoted to learning to assess program outcomes, we know it will be hard work for a region's commission on ministry to assess 16 competency areas, with 5 or 6 outcomes per area. We can give some clues to help your work; and our participation with regions would help us know at what level you expect seminary graduates to perform in terms of evangelism, church administration, and stewardship—three of those areas seminary graduates wish they had more knowledge and skills.

There is a sense of urgency to the seminary's change work. PTS has moved with dispatch online. We are the only Disciples seminary offering a full on campus program along with the maximum number of courses online at a master's level as accreditation standards permit. We are looking intensely at who our students are and who our students need to be. The online program has significantly increased our Disciples enrollment. The advent of Saint Paul School of Theology in Oklahoma City, coupled with a national United Methodist restriction that forbids United Methodist clergy candidates to take online courses at non-UM seminaries have cost us students from that communion.

Part of the sense of urgency is because we feel the churches' urgency. A bishop friend of mine said, "We used to think that seminary graduates had about 5 years post-seminary to unpack their education, learn the practical stuff they need to know, and how to pastor. However, many of the congregations I see no longer have 5 years they can wait."

PTS is engaged in a strategic planning cycle. It is too early to say definitively what will be decided, but I am sure about the following.

- We have done and will do more organized, intentional listening. There is an ongoing question of who a seminary listens to. Congregations with life. Leaders trying to start new communities. Places where something courageous is going on.
- New product development. Reform of degree programs. Addition of non-degree education, especially for laity.
- Identify niches. E.g., maybe bi-vocational ministry, given the age and life and work experience of our students. We need to be more intentional in telling students "Don't give up your day jobs." A call to ministry does not necessarily accompany a full-time comfortable compensation package paid by a local church.
- Partnerships—bring the wisdom of practitioners into the program more systemically. Again, I would welcome a serious conversation with the Hope Partnership leaders.

When I attended my United Methodist Annual Conference session this year, the bishop sponsored a luncheon for those of us appointed beyond a local church. We went around the tables, introducing ourselves with title and what we do. I said I was the president at PTS, and I

lead a seminary where we do what we do because Jesus deserves to be served by an educated church. There were smiles and a few snickers along with the quip “good luck with that.”

Seminary education has never been about the clergy; its purpose is not to create a professional class of clergy. The purpose of seminary is to produce a more educated church capable of following Jesus in the world in a true way. Sure, it is essential that our clergy leaders are:

- Responsible biblical interpreters
- Learning to follow, and how to lead others to follow, the Way of Jesus

But the gold standard for seminary education is set not by the educational attainment of clergy but to what extent we have contributed to Christian communities comprised of responsible biblical interpreters who are learning to follow, and are skilled in persuading and leading others to follow, the Way of Jesus.

Now we’re talking about holy fire rather than the kind I mentioned at the outset—it was on fire when I laid down on it. Or, maybe what we are experiencing, in biblical terms, is a refiner’s fire.