

The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE CHURCH TODAY

The triennium since our last convention has been a period of significant change for the General Theological Seminary. A new dean and president, a comprehensive plan for the future initiated by the trustees, an impressive number of new program initiatives, and the addition of an unprecedented number of new faculty as well as several new staff members have together made this an exciting and productive time for the church's oldest seminary.

Bishop G.P. Mellick Belshaw, chairman of General's Board of Trustees, became acting dean on July 1, 1997 following the departure of the seminary's eleventh dean and president, the Rt. Rev. Craig B. Anderson. Under Bishop Belshaw's wise and able leadership, the seminary began the search process for a new dean which culminated in the election in January 1998 of the Rev. Ward B. Ewing, rector of Trinity Church, Buffalo, and a 1967 graduate of GTS. Dean Ewing arrived in April 1998 and was officially installed during a wonderful celebration in October of that year. The event involved every constituency in the seminary's local and extended community—from the support staff to the seminary's children to the most distinguished ecumenical representatives. The dean's inclusive vision for the event had come to fruition, and his pleasure was clearly evident.

In an interview shortly after his arrival, Dean Ewing predicted that his deanship would be highly participatory, involving the development of teams and consensus-building. "I would much prefer to take the time to develop consensus and create a program in which everyone can claim ownership," he said. Consistent with this approach, the new dean spent his first six months intently listening to many opinions, ideas, and plans for the future. He also challenged GTS trustees to engage in a similar period of exploration and conversation, which culminated in the seminary's first visioning retreat in January of 1999. Many of the new initiatives which are now a part of the seminary's life had their beginnings in this important conference which engaged students, faculty, staff, alumni/ae, and trustees in a concentrated visioning process for the future.

In the months which followed, work groups and committees were formed which served the trustees well in preparing for their meeting on May 18, 1999, during which a comprehensive new itinerary was adopted for GTS called *The Plan to Thrive*. The plan addressed five major areas:

- *New Program Initiatives* including adapting the M.Div. program to better attract and accommodate commuter and part-time students, expanding the Center for Christian Spirituality, developing a joint program in Hispanic ministry with the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and expanding partnerships for ministry training with nearby dioceses, and the addition of a new staff position for planning and program development
- *Financial Stability* called for the goal of reducing the endowment take down through administrative restructuring and budget reductions in a number of areas except program
- *Stabilization of the Physical Plant* by the appropriation of \$2 million for infrastructure in the next two fiscal years

- A new *Mission Statement* for the seminary
- The commitment to a Fund-Raising Campaign.

“We’re looking toward the future with confidence and a renewed sense of historic purpose. We’re listening to and studying the needs of the church today in the area of theological education,” said an enthusiastic Dean Ewing following the meeting. One of the most far reaching outcomes was the trustees’ adoption of a new, succinct Mission Statement,

The General Theological Seminary is an Episcopal institution called to educate and form leaders for the church in a changing world.

Asserting the seminary’s historic Episcopal identity, the new statement emphasizes the nature of the school’s mission as a call from God to form as well educate the church’s leaders, a group which is seen to include scholars and practitioners, both lay and ordained. The statement’s conclusion stresses that the seminary must both respond to and anticipate the church’s evolving needs.

In the first year following the adoption of the *Plan to Thrive*, significant progress has been made toward the fulfillment of many of its goals. This fall a new and strongly publicized program of part-time and evening courses has drawn a record number of participants. Plans are moving forward toward a center for Hispanic ministry at the seminary under the direction of the seminary’s first associate dean for planning. Reduction goals for the endowment take down are on target as we approach the second half of our fiscal year, and our vice president for development has recently outlined his agenda for the beginning of a capital campaign.

The seminary’s lengthy period of self-examination and dialog with the church it serves is producing tangible results and a revitalized identity for General Seminary. In keeping with the concern to become a more inclusive community, the board of trustees at their January 2000 meeting retained the Rev. Eric Law to provide resources and training for all levels of the seminary to assist in building a community that is more open to diversity of race, background, sexual orientation, and culture.

The triennium has also seen number of milestones in terms of the seminary’s faculty and staff. Retirements included those of the Rev. Dr. Frederick Shriver after 27 years of service to GTS as professor of church history and the Rev. Dr. Margaret Guenther who retired after being director of the Center for Christian Spirituality since 1986. Prof. J. Neil Alexander left the seminary’s faculty in 1997 to teach liturgics at Sewanee and Prof. R. William Franklin departed GTS the following year to become dean and president of Berkeley Divinity School. The Rev. Dr. Joanne McWilliam returned to her native Canada after serving as professor of systematic theology since 1994.

Since 1997 the seminary faculty has added an unprecedented five new members: the Rev. Dr. Mitties DeChamplain became Trinity Church Professor of Preaching and the Rev. Dr. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, Assistant Professor of Liturgics in 1998. The same year Dr. Robert Bruce Mullin joined the faculty as Society for the Promotion of Religion and Learning Professor of History and World Mission and Professor of Modern Church History, and Dr. Judith Newman was appointed Assistant Professor of Old Testament. The faculty’s most recent addition was that of the Rev. Dr. Mark Richardson last summer who serves as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology.

In appointments among the senior staff, Mr. Kenneth Ashworth was appointed by Dean Ewing as vice president for development in September of 1998. The Rev. Alon White, appointed as the seminary's first chaplain in many years, began her duties on March 1, 1999, and on July 1 the Rev. Jessica Hatch became the seminary's first associate dean for planning.

The seminary has seen significant activity in the area of ecumenical partnerships, having signed a covenant agreement with the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in January of 1998. The two schools jointly sponsored two major conferences on the Lutheran-Episcopal Concordat and are currently pursuing plans for a jointly sponsored center for Hispanic ministry. Both the faculty and trustees of the seminary passed resolutions supporting the revised Concordat being considered by this Convention.

In other recent activities, GTS has taken important leadership in the church's celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer, having offered a major exhibition of its library holdings and a series of twelve lectures by prominent scholars. In April of 1999, the seminary held a major symposium celebrating the contributions of women to the life of the seminary, a theme which was continued in a library exhibition in the spring of 2000 which explored the varying roles and ministries of women in the Episcopal Church from colonial days to the present.

Growing interest in the role of technology in theological education has resulted in the seminary's being selected for a grant from the Lilly Foundation that will modernize our classrooms and enable the installation of a computer lab at GTS. The seminary's award-winning website, which opened on March 1, 1997, continues to serve the church with information and newly added recorded lectures.

Finally, in accordance with the stress the Plan to Thrive places on the important area of capital improvements, the seminary has added a new lighting system to its chapel, has remodeled and installed new windows in its landmarked classroom building, has renovated its daycare center, and has currently undertaken extensive repair of the roofs of a number of buildings. Chelsea Square, that amazing patch of green in the middle of Manhattan and the seminary's historic home for the past 173 years, is a cherished legacy for our whole church. As the Episcopal Church's official seminary, (whose name it shares with our General Convention) GTS looks forward with commitment and enthusiasm to serving the evolving needs of today's church and the church that is being born in our midst.

Respectfully submitted,
Bruce Parker
Director of Communications
The General Theological Seminary