

Founded for the Future

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John Hines' vision for the church in the Southwest included the creation of a seminary for the whole church, a new kind of theological school that would "interpret Christian theology in terms of the modern world." He imagined that it would function "as a place of theological training in which God's engagement with the world in Christ Jesus would be boldly interpreted for potential priests in a fantastically changing era."^[1] From the post war years when student enrollment in seminaries boomed, through the struggles of the church over racism and Civil Rights, through to the turmoil of our own time, the changing era has changed more than once, and the fortunes of the church have shifted as well. But the confident and hopeful spirit that was present at its founding still animates the community of teaching and learning at Seminary of the Southwest. Faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the conviction of its power to address, learn from, critique, and transform culture shape what and how we teach here.

Dan Aleshire, president of the Association of Theological Schools and unofficial dean of theological education in America, recently suggested to our faculty and administration that seminaries exist in order to answer a single question: "How are we going to allow the full voice of the Hebrew and Christian heritage to speak within the present moment?" Our faculty is constantly seeking to do just that--to bring the riches of the Christian tradition into conversation with the contemporary world most effectively and faithfully. In biblical studies students learn how to preach and teach scripture in a culture, imaginatively impoverished, and hungry for nourishment from the Word. They explore in systematic theology the narrative of identity, origins, and destiny more true than the competing stories of entertainment and advertising. They imagine and construct models for economy alternative to those that prevail. In a society of soundbites, virtual relationships, and multitasking, they practice the low-tech, real time human gathering we call liturgy. In these and other ways, students learn here to read and proclaim the gospel in ways that address and critique contemporary culture.

At the same time, the gospel is not an essence that exists apart from these cultural moments, like a ghost that moves in and out of various bodies without any change to itself. Christ's message of grace and forgiveness is universal, but only in the sense that it is a message roomy enough for all creation, not in the sense of an unchanging propositional truth claim. That means even as the church brings Christ's challenge to the world, it must learn to hear and adapt to the world's challenge to the church. Our faculty continues to study new scholarship from philosophy and the social sciences. We host an annual conference, co-sponsored with the University of Texas Religious Studies Department, in which graduate students and faculty from the various higher education institutions around central Texas gather to share their research on the various subdisciplines of the study of religion. We assign students readings from Milton and

Dostoevsky, we show the films of Alfonso Arau . We explore ways that Facebook, Twitter, blogging, and podcasting might expand our conversations about theology, preaching, and the vocation of the priest. In these ways and more, we are learning from and adapting to this particular cultural moment in which we seek to let the “full voice of Hebrew and Christian heritage” speak.

This cultural moment is not, of course, only about social media and new scholarships. Ours is also a moment of political partisanship, child poverty, the fears and realities of terrorist strikes, warfare, and the hopes and ills of an increasingly globalized consumerism. The challenge to let the gospel speak in the midst of such times can seem an overwhelming task. Where to begin?

This question is amplified by the fact that the Episcopal Church is not as influential with the cities and towns of America as it once was, in the days when a place on the vestry of a certain church was the first step towards a golf date with the governor. Our students can no longer assume that they will have a captive audience when they begin to address the challenges of the age in parishes around the country. If the world is rapidly changing, and no longer listening to what Christian ministers have to say, how do we respond to the call to bring the gospel to bear on our times?

One of our convictions at Southwest is that attention to the local can prepare us to face the challenges of the global. Our Junior MDiv students “encounter” the world across the Rio Grande in their first January. As Middlers, they spend time in social work agencies or engaged in particular ministries in communities around the globe. As they enter into field parishes and build relationships with clergy and parishioners, they begin to think creatively about the “big” questions of inculturation in appropriately “little” ways. This woman needs health insurance, that man’s addictions are hurting his family, these refugees from the drug war need help communicating the local school district. The difficult paths through these demands are some of the ways in which we learn together to preach the gospel even as we slow down to “read” the culture and listen to its many voices.

In 2012 teaching and learning at Seminary of the Southwest is a vigorous and lively enterprise in which faculty and students interpret and proclaim God's engagement with the world in Christ Jesus. We hope that as a community founded on the trust that “fantastic change” does not preclude faithfulness to this gospel, we may continue to embody Bishop Hines’s vision as a community of Christian scholarship and vocation prepared to listen to, challenge, and receive the challenges of this changing world.