

## **Convocation Address**

### **Reflections on United's Gifts and Call**

by Mary McNamara

It is an honor to welcome you as we mark the beginning of our 49<sup>th</sup> academic year. Ours is a school born of a dream of partnership, unity, and understanding, a dream of a world made one through dialogue and good will. Idealism, hope, faithfulness, and a strong sense of community are the building blocks that comfort, protect, and support us every day. They are as irresistible as they are pervasive and inspiring.

Now approaching the half-century mark, we find ourselves in an increasingly diverse and global world. When United was founded, most people had a sense of each denomination's core beliefs and conviction regarding their truth. In recent research by the Pew Foundation, 82% of those surveyed now believe that there is "more than one true way to interpret the teachings in my religion." Many scholars and students are particularly challenged, for between our protestant claim of "reformed and always reforming" and our American pragmatism, there seems to be no ultimate answer to any perplexing question. There can even be competing and equally persuasive, conflicting responses! In fact, the same holds true of the quest of each of us to live lives of integrity and value. This is a world that has a great capacity to surprise, a world which will challenge our sense of vocation from time to time, and which might lull us into a deep sense of comfort, only to rudely awaken us.

However, there are some commitments here at United that you can count on. I want to mention them today because they are important, and those commitments will continue in the future. Within at least these parameters, and others that might be named, this seminary will not surprise you.

#### **Commitment to Compassion and Care**

The first is particularly important. There is a parable in Matthew and Luke that conveys something of the essence of United. It reads:

Who among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

On the face of it, this parable is not practical and does not make sense. But it does make sense because, at one time or another, each of us is the one; most of the time, we are the 99, but every so often, we are the one. We are the one because of bad luck, bad health, or bad judgment – but we are the one. And, if we are students, for example, it is then that we most need the support of a faculty member or a staff member, and they are there! This is a place where trustees, faculty, staff, and students can turn to each other for empathy and help. While no institution can live out this parable perfectly, this remarkable love and solidarity is just part of what makes United extraordinary.

#### **United is a Liberal Seminary**

United is also an extraordinary example of a liberal institution. That is not to claim that everyone here is a liberal or that we want you to be, but that United as a whole cherishes these values. Paul Rasor of Virginia Wesleyan College is the author of a recent article in the "Journal of Law and Religion." It describes the characteristics and strengths of theological liberalism with startling clarity. As I recount these and add my comments, you will recognize our seminary.

Rasor observes that commitment to human freedom is a central concern of liberalism. To be liberal is to be committed to openness and flexibility. Liberal theology adapts intentionally to modern culture and sees itself as a prophetic tradition oriented toward justice. It emphasizes the importance of understanding and responding to the circumstances of its own time and place and welcomes people of various views, including people with differing views and practices of faith. This is grounded in an affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, and that is grounded in the belief that all are created in the image of God.

Liberalism is accompanied by a commitment to egalitarian values, non-coercive institutions, relationships based on consent, shared authority in decision-making, and inclusiveness. Liberals are committed to creating institutions that are shaped by these values and that help people to achieve human dignity and fulfillment. We speak out against injustice, and do so especially on behalf of the poor and marginalized.

We also believe that people are capable of setting goals and acting purposefully. Even though we understand that human freedom is not perfect or complete, we know that it is significant and meaningful. We assert the importance of the freedom of conscience and hold that religious belief and commitment are meaningful only if free from coercion. As Gordon Kaufman has stated, a central task of constructive theology is to develop theological concepts that “will more effectively facilitate human flourishing and fulfillment.” We hold that, if our identities and selves are shaped within society, then these contexts must provide for human flourishing. This can best happen in open and tolerant communities.

It seems important to summarize all of this because we can be proud of this heritage, and we will be acting upon it regularly as a public institution. We will be seeking out ways to work for the common good, to witness against injustice, and to stand with those working toward a better future.

One of our first initiatives this fall will be to facilitate the screening by TPT, our local public television station, of the new series developed by WGBH and Harvard University on the topic “Justice: What is the Right Thing to Do?” and its viewing within congregations and by persons and families of many faiths. This series will feature faculty member Michael Sandel engaging audiences on key moral questions, the first of which will be “When is it right to kill?” Within the first few minutes, he poses a question to his audience, primarily young adults, racially, ethnically, and economically mixed, men and women. Assume you are driving a trolley and have lost control of the brakes, but can still steer it. If you drive straight ahead, you will certainly kill five people. If you turn to a side track, you will kill one. What is the right thing to do? Now imagine that you are on a bridge over a speeding trolley that will kill five. If you push the fat man next to you over the edge, he will stop the train, and you will kill one. What is the right thing to do? We, through our participation, add the questions, “What difference does it make to be a person of faith? Why?”

We are hopeful about this project, which is new. While working on this, we will continue to work in partnership with congregations, governing bodies, councils of churches, and community organizations that seek to help people in this community and beyond.

### **United’s Strength in Education**

This is a year in which the board of trustees is working on strategic planning and in which there will be a number of serious discussions about United’s many opportunities.

One of the well-developed elements in the draft of United’s plan are the words that describe our strength as an educational institution. It reads in part, “The core strength of United is the unique brand of theological education offered here. It is academically rigorous and responsible, thoroughly conversant with the tradition, committed to the ways in which historical-critical-literary approaches open up new possibilities, and grounded in belief in the relevance and power of the Christian faith to transform the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” The text goes on to describe our educational program as “powerfully integrative, incorporating the spiritual and the ethical at every step.”

In light of changing needs, we have begun to offer new programs. The Academy for Vital Christianity and the Institute for the Support of Pastoral Ministries are two good examples of that work. This pattern of providing new opportunities for more people to benefit from theological education will continue.

This kind of education is only possible because the faculty here is exceptionally well qualified and we have a remarkable dean. Education here is serious and of high quality. We are blessed by having students who have great dreams for their future and amazing energy to pursue those dreams. We will maintain this core strength and live out this commitment with enthusiasm.

### **Ours is an Ironic and Grace-filled Role**

Even as we make this affirmation, we recognize that providing for the training of ministers and other religious leaders is a complex and sensitive task. There is incredible power in the role, because people trust their pastors and counselors who are called to bring together healing, compassion, integrity, and faith. When they don't do so, trust is betrayed. In Brian Friel's play, "Faith Healer," at the Guthrie this fall, Francis Hardy is an itinerant healer. He reflects his own experience, commenting that it is, "A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, ... How did I get involved? ... let's say I did it ... because I could do it. That's accurate enough. And occasionally it did work---oh, yes, ... And when it did, when I stood before a man and placed my hands on him and watched him become whole in my presence, those were nights of exultation, of consummation---no, not that I was doing good, giving relief, spreading joy -- good God, no, nothing at all to do with that; but because the questions that undermined my life then became meaningless and because I knew that for those few hours I had become whole in myself..."

The vocation so many of us have chosen for ourselves is trusted by those who come to us in need of healing and other kinds of care. We need to be sure that we do not use what we have learned for our own validation, our sense of power, or out of our need for healing, but for good. Here we teach students to honor people's trust and treat the mystery of God's healing presence with tenderness. We know that it takes a long time to mature in the faith. Augustine's Confessions are an early and brilliant record of this. He was baptized before receiving the usual preparation and spent years recording his journey. Here we are committed to walking with our students as they grow in faith. Here we are patient gardeners of a scared trust.

### **United is Committed to the Arts**

Finally, I want to talk about our commitment to the arts. When I first visited the campus, I was almost overwhelmed by the beauty of the exhibits, by the thoughtful use of art, and by the chapel itself. It is rare to see a seminary that uses art so well or that understands its role in learning so thoroughly. You have that here, and we will preserve it and even find more ways for you to express this giftedness. In 2004, John Thomas, then general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, in a speech here observed that, "Shaping...ministers involves ...helping [students] encounter, perhaps for the first time, the dreams and dramas, the hopes and hurts of the stranger, the outcast, the marginalized...the seminaries of the church are... uniquely called to steward the church's imagination and thus help the church conjure and propose future alternatives." United and each of you are stewards of that imagination. This must not be lost. Our strength in the arts must not be lost.

### **There is Much to Celebrate**

There is much to be grateful for here at United. There is much to celebrate. As we begin this academic year, let us do so recognizing that the care and education of students is indeed a sacred trust. We who are trustees, faculty, and staff are honored to have that responsibility. We cherish it and, as always, challenge ourselves to excellence. We are also called to witness in the community. Let us do so with hope and

optimism, compassion, and the vision of a better future, trusting in God's good purposes for this seminary.