



PACIFIC SCHOOL *of* RELIGION

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# *Leadership Letter*

February 2006

Dear Friend:

Following our “family reunion” at the Earl Lectures, it’s my pleasure to write to my friends and partners in theological education about some of the accomplishments and challenges that are shaping Pacific School of Religion.

First, I’m happy to report that this year’s Earl Lectures and Pastoral Conference attracted a larger crowd than usual—close to 1,000 persons gathered to hear lectures and sermons by James Forbes, senior minister of Riverside Church; feminist theologian Kwok Pui Lan; media and religion scholar Diane Winston; Holocaust scholar and former PSR acting president and trustee Hubert Locke; and our own Delwin Brown, dean emeritus. We hoped that the three days of lectures and workshops would help clarify what we mean by “progressive Christianity,” and I think this happened. I’m glad we are finally having the conversation we need in order to define our movement by what we affirm rather than what we reject.

If you missed the lectures, you can listen to them at [www.psr.edu](http://www.psr.edu).

On the first day of the Earl Lectures, we debuted a new Web-based resource, [www.progressivechristianwitness.org](http://www.progressivechristianwitness.org), which is designed to further the contributions progressive Christians can make to a vital public square. Early reports are that this new part of our ministry has been very well received (lots of “hits!”).

## **Faculty Searches**

Our faculty has taken on the very big challenge of searching for a new dean and three new faculty colleagues this semester. This means there is hardly a day in February or March in which we don’t have candidates visiting campus. We put each candidate through the paces with lots of meetings, a public lecture, quality time and dinner with the whole faculty, and visits to the Graduate Theological Union. Each search committee includes students and a representative from the GTU. We look forward to welcoming new colleagues this summer.

## Trustee News

Last fall we welcomed two new trustees, and welcomed back a returning trustee. Robin McCarter Anderson is not a newcomer to PSR, having served for several years on our investment and finance committees and having lived on campus while her dad served as PSR's president. Robin lives in Piedmont, CA, and is active in Piedmont Community Church. Dick Hamm of Indianapolis has also joined the board; he brings experience as a local church pastor, regional executive, and minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We welcomed back to the board Julien Phillips, who co-founded Partners in School Innovation and Ashoka, a nonprofit that supports social entrepreneurs in developing countries.

This is a time of transition on the board as Scott Hafner completes his term of service, including four years as board chair. I will miss the sometimes daily calls and his sage advice—though he knows we're not going to let him go too far away. Nobody has done more to strengthen PSR's fundraising capacity. The person the board has selected to fill Scott's large shoes as chair is Jerry Vallery, whose passion for the school grows every day. Jerry is an entrepreneur and founder of a hedge fund. Jerry and Karen Vallery live in Alamo, CA, and are members of Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco.

## Reading List

I know that some readers of my letters skip everything I have to say about PSR and go straight to the book recommendations, so—before I turn to a story with a great deal of significance for me and for PSR—here they are:

*On Beauty* by Zadie Smith is an amazing novel by a British woman of English and Jamaican descent. The book takes us to the Boston area and a fictitious university that seems a lot like Harvard. I won't give away the plot, but will say I loved the ways Ms. Smith punctures conventional understandings of race, class, and gender. I've now gone on to one of her earlier books, *White Teeth*.

For a long time I have admired the work of Doris Kearns Goodwin, partly because we were in college together. I was disappointed to learn that her latest book was to be on Abraham Lincoln. How can there be more to say about our most studied president? But I was wrong. Her *Team of Rivals: A Political Biography of Abraham Lincoln* is wonderful. Why? For several decades our Berkeley neighbor, sociologist Robert Bellah, has been calling attention to the study of virtue in American public life. Doris Kearns Goodwin shows that Lincoln and his cabinet members were leaders who were determined to make virtuous decisions. We could use a dose of that today!

## **Learning in Samoa**

In the past couple of years PSR has dramatically expanded what we call the “contextual learning” elements of our Master of Divinity curriculum. Almost every course offered on campus includes time in the community. A course in Protestant spirituality takes students into African American churches in Oakland. A pastoral care course includes sessions at San Quentin State Prison or Napa State Hospital. The Doctor of Ministry class I teach this semester will include a session at a Japanese American parish in El Cerrito.

Two years ago, after Linda and I returned from our sabbatical, I mentioned that the South Pacific would be an interesting place for a contextual learning experience for PSR students. One of our sharp staff members picked up on it immediately. “When?” she asked. “Maybe in 2006” was my hesitant response. Next thing I knew, the “South Pacific Immersion” was in the course catalog.

On January 6, 2006, my faculty colleague Mai-Anh Le Tran and I, along with PSR trustee Harold Fields and his wife, Diane, and 15 students, left for a weekend in Honolulu and a week split between American and Independent Samoa. In Honolulu, we heard presentations from PSR alumni/ae on the religious history of Hawaii and the Samoan diaspora there, and we enjoyed two dinners hosted by Samoan and Tongan congregations. On Saturday morning we heard from a panel of Samoan leaders, and on Sunday we worshiped with a large Samoan Congregational church. We also hosted a lunch for PSR alumni/ae and friends.

Late Sunday evening we departed for Pago Pago in American Samoa and our temporary home at Kanana Fou Theological Seminary, administered by the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa. From the beginning, we were overwhelmed by the hospitality of the Samoan people. Our being in the Samoas was a big deal: we were greeted at the airport by the local television station.

The week included many lectures and presentations, two visits by the governor of American Samoa, a trip to a local beach and other tourist activities, and many surprises. We spent two amazing days in Independent Samoa hosted by the Women’s Fellowship of Moataa Congregational Church, where the most wonderful moments took place in informal conversations in the church’s kitchen.

As beautiful as the settings were, a key part of the experience was to take us out of our comfort zone and into situations that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

Let me give a couple of examples. Our group was formally greeted in what is known as the ava ceremony. This is a rather formal ceremony in which the hosts sit on one side of the room and the visitors sit on the other. On both sides clergy and the local chiefs play special roles.

Professor Tran, Dr. Fields, and I were seated at the head of our delegation. As the chiefs approached to greet us, there was more than a little uncertainty about how Samoan chiefs would approach a white American male, a Vietnamese American

woman, and an African American man. They—and we—were taken beyond our comfort zone on issues of gender and race.

On our final day at Kanana Fou Theological Seminary, our hosts asked that our students share their thinking about two issues: the nature of Christian mission today and new religious movements.

I was awfully proud of our students that morning. To give one example: Kayla Bonewell took the provocative position that the United Church of Christ is a new religious movement.\* She described her experience as a teenager in Oklahoma City and her discovery of herself as a lesbian. When her own church rejected her, the UCC was there for her and nurtured her as a Christian who has now found her way toward preparation for ordained ministry.

I could feel the tension rising in the room as Kayla told her story. The Samoans are not unfriendly to LGBT people, but people don't talk a lot about the ordination of LGBT pastors.

During a break in the conversation, the general secretary of the Congregational Christian Church in American Samoa took the floor, turned to our student, and thanked her for her remarks. "Our church is in partnership with the United Church of Christ, and we don't always agree on every issue. But we are still partners. Our church has avoided talking about homosexuality. We do not want to be silent anymore." Kayla's story was one example of how to broach the subject. "Your words are important to us," the general secretary continued, "Thank you for your gift."

The Samoan people set the world standard for hospitality. Everywhere we went, we were greeted as family members. Our welcome forced all of us to think about how we embrace newcomers in our midst. We left with an amazing number of gifts, which embarrassed us when we considered the comparatively lower living standards of most of our hosts (I'll always read Luke 21:1-4 with different eyes). One of our greatest gifts was being made to think hard about stewardship—of our new Samoan friends and of our Pacific School of Religion.

With sincere thanks for your help in the stewardship of PSR,



William McKinney  
President

\* For more on this suggestion, see professor Randi Walker's new book, *The Evolution of a UCC Style* (United Church Press, 2005).