



PACIFIC SCHOOL *of* RELIGION

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# *Leadership Letter*

September 1, 2007

Dear Friend,

Each year I outline my fall Leadership Letter on the plane returning from Boston and our summer break time on Cape Cod. As Linda and I worked our way across the country this summer, my eager anticipation for the coming academic year was tempered by a sense of the constancy of change and transition in all of our lives.

Sadly, we lost Professor Doug Adams this summer, following his battle with cancer. Doug's impact on the field of religion and the arts and on PSR and the GTU has been enormous. I said in announcing Doug's death in July that I don't think any other theological school could have produced a Doug Adams. We already miss him—his signature long voice messages on the phone, his devotion to students and colleagues and to his beloved Center for Arts, Religion and Education.

In different ways, we've said farewell in the past couple of months to people who have been wonderful colleagues and friends. Professor Choan-Seng Song has now retired from the active faculty and will be teaching in Taiwan. Trustees Janet Fujioka, Harold Fields, and Gary Nye have completed their third terms of service, but I'm delighted that all three have agreed to continue taking on special roles on behalf of the school. Trustee Mariellen Sawada-Yoshino has resigned in order to focus fully on her new position as United Methodist district superintendent in Fresno.

## **Securing the Future of the GTU**

Many of us have been concerned about the future strength of the Graduate Theological Union, to which PSR is an important and enthusiastic contributor. Last year I was pleased to chair a task force looking at future scenarios for the consortium. The task force made its initial report in May and will begin this fall to implement the most promising of several new directions. While we continue to be optimistic about the future of the consortium, we also know it is time to make serious changes and embrace new scenarios for securing that future. Feel free to contact me at [wmckinney@psr.edu](mailto:wmckinney@psr.edu) if you'd like more information.

## **PSR's Strategic Plan**

This is the third full year of the Strategic Plan adopted by the board in January 2005, and I am very excited by the progress we have made. We are expanding our offerings in continuing and community education for progressive Christian leaders, and we will soon hire new staff to lead this work. We will also soon hire a director for our program on Dismantling Racism and Building Cross Cultural Competence. This academic year will see the debut of a redesigned Web site that will help us do a more effective job of telling the PSR story. And, finally, we have in hand a report from a consulting firm that is helping us think through our advancement and fund development efforts.

Led by the board's finance committee, we are taking a careful look at our facilities needs for the future. Our facilities crew does an amazing job of keeping our campus safe, fresh, and inviting, but the buildings themselves are aging and in need of upgrades. We'll be working this year to set priorities for a future capital campaign with a significant bricks-and-mortar component. The Tradition of Boldness capital campaign strengthened our endowment and returned PSR to financial health. Now we need to turn our attention to building the infrastructure we need for the future.

This fall we will welcome visiting teams from our two accrediting agencies, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Professor Randi Walker has taken on the assignment of leading us in preparing the self-study that is at the center of the process. Our report is remarkably candid about PSR's strengths and weaknesses. Having been on lots of visiting teams, I have come to believe that the strongest schools are not afraid to tell it like it is. Accreditation opens us to the critique of our various publics, which we welcome. A copy of the report is on our Web site at <http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm?l=27>

## **Summer Reading**

With the help of a wonderful little public library near our summer cottage, I managed to read just over 50 books this summer, including mysteries and legal dramas, a lot from PD James and Cape Cod author Peter Abrahams.

Among my more serious reading was a wonderful new biography of Amie Semple McPherson titled *Amie Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, by Mathew Avery Sutton. He tells the story of one of the most important but largely unknown founders of the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, a key congregation in the Foursquare Gospel movement and one of America's most important mega-churches between the first and second world wars. Sutton's book has it all: political intrigue, church politics at its most ruthless, and sexual and racial struggles. Too few know the story of this important early 20th-century religious leader. The biography helps us understand the historical roots of some of our current religious and social struggles.

I also profited from two new books by leading American theologians which deserve the attention of all who care about the future of Progressive Christianity. They are brief, well-written, and relatively accessible to a lay audience.

The more difficult of the two books is *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision*, by Peter C. Hodgson, who had a distinguished career at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Although less than 100 pages long, it is tough going at points (in the way Gary Dorrien can be tough going), but it's worth sticking with his argument. What's radical about it is his argument for the centrality of freedom—God's freedom and human freedom—in Christian life. I've been arguing in recent years that there are new possibilities for conversation across the lines that separate some evangelical, neo-orthodox, liberal, ecological, and liberation theologians. Hodgson has helped me to see that the common ground among these theological streams is a radical appreciation of freedom.

The second book is *Wayward Christian Soldiers*, by Charles S. Marsh. Marsh teaches theology at the University of Virginia, where he also directs the Project on Lived Religion. *Wayward Christian Soldiers* is an example of what a socially engaged or public theology can look like. Marsh's focus is on how some religious and political leaders have allowed religion and theology to be co-opted for partisan purposes; but he also engages anti-Christian critics like Sam Harris, whom Marsh describes as having something in common with the Christian Right. Here's a wonderful line: "The two hurl lumpy dogmatism at each other like children in a food fight."

What I like most about Marsh's book is that it is constructive at the core. He is clearly disgusted by much of the religious discourse he sees in America today, but the book is no mere screed against the other side. He knows that unless Christianity can separate itself from its current political captivity America's future is rather bleak. As I finished the book (which is twice the length of Hodgson's), I found myself thinking this is what we need to prepare our students to be able to do as public theologians.

Drop me a line and let me know if you have found any of these recommendations helpful—or if you have suggestions for my own reading list.

### **Hoping to see you**

I'm thrilled by the number of PSR alums who are finding their ways into positions of leadership. Again this year, our folks were very visible in the national and regional meetings of the denominations we serve. That was certainly true at the UCC General Synod in Hartford, where our graduates and current board members were highly visible. People are beginning to notice that PSR folks seem to be everywhere. I smiled when I heard friends talking about three young pastors in southeastern Massachusetts who are helping breathe new life

into their congregations. All three have graduated from PSR in my time here, and I feel like a proud parent!

I'm looking forward to a number of preaching opportunities this fall, mostly in UCC and UMC churches. As of now I'm scheduled to be in San Jose, Palo Alto (twice), and Olympia, Washington. You can track faculty and staff appearances at <http://psr.edu/page.cfm?l=64>.

I hope to see many of you on campus on October 14 at 2:00 p.m., when we hold a celebration of the life and ministry of Doug Adams. It's a day you won't want to miss.

Blessings to you, with thanks from a grateful PSR president!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian McKinnon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

P.S. As this letter was moving toward production, we received word of the death of trustee emeritus Robert Riddell, after a long illness. Bob started his service on the PER board in 1979, served as board chair, was responsible for the construction of the Mud Building, chaired the search committee that brought Neely McCarter to PSR, and with his wife Kay endowed the faculty position now held by Aaron Brody. There was no more important person to the life of the Board of Trustees and to PER and the GTU than Bob Riddell. We miss him.