

Austin Graduate School of Theology
New Student Orientation
President's Welcome:
"The Adventure of Theological Education"

It is my pleasure to welcome you as you join us in this adventure of theological education. For me, any new adventure is usually undertaken with a mixture of excitement and fear, anticipation and anxiety. I imagine you probably have some of those mixed feelings this evening. However, I am confident that you gave much thought and prayer to your decision to embark on this adventure. I want to assure you that we are equally serious, purposeful, and prayerful about our role in your theological education. Last Thursday morning, during a service of consecration, the administration, faculty, staff, and student leaders vowed to dedicate ourselves to God's high calling and to support and encourage one another in this calling during the school year.

As we begin this adventure of theological education, I think it is important for you to know our philosophy about what a seminary should be. At Austin Grad, we intentionally uphold the ideals of a theological seminary. In its earliest usage, the word "seminary" signified a seedbed or nursery. In other words, a seminary was something that fostered, developed or promoted growth. There the object of attention was rooted and nurtured.

In time, the term seminary came to designate a school for training ministers and church leaders. I want to draw a clear distinction between what we are and are not. Austin Grad is not a school of religion seeking to do academic work apart from the faith and life of the church. As a seminary, we esteem scholarship, but only as it serves the faith and life of the church.

Through undergraduate and graduate programs at Austin Grad, we aim to nurture the faith of those who would serve as ministers and leaders in the church. Thomas Gillespie, a former president of Princeton Theological Seminary, said it well. A theological education should enable "believers to *think the faith* in order to more fully *live the faith*." Austin Grad is committed to providing such an education.

As a seminary, our School exists because of and on behalf of the church. Therefore, we encourage all of our students to be actively involved in and accountable to a congregation in their faith tradition. While among us, I urge you to learn to use the tools of theological study and develop the skills of theological reflection on behalf of the church. If you follow our academic program and work hard, you will inevitably grow in your knowledge of the faith and develop your ability to think about the faith beyond that of many others. In so doing, I pray this growth will be exceeded only by your humility and love for the Lord and his church.

Our mission at Austin Grad is to *educate Christian servants and strengthen churches. Our goal is to know, understand, practice and pass on the Christian faith.* This is consistent with a time-honored definition of theology: "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm of Canterbury, 1033-1109). The importance of an educated ministry cannot be overestimated. An accurate assessment is offered in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*; "... when there has been a slackness in insisting on education as a

requisite for ministry, the first casualty has been preaching, and at such times the work and the witness of the Church has suffered.”

While addressing one of our orientation sessions a few years ago, Dr. McNicol spoke about our professors’ common emphasis. He said, “We guide our students in *rigorous* study of the Bible.” One thing I appreciate about those who came before me at our School, including our current faculty, is their respect for the Bible and their use of the best biblical scholarship available. This emphasis on Bible study will be the cornerstone of your related studies in theology, church history and practical ministry. Such devoted study requires hard work. Therefore, I urge you to roll up your sleeves, because you are about get down to some challenging and very rewarding work.

Our aim in your theological education is not only assisting you know and understand the faith better, but also helping you practice and pass on the faith in the context of the church and world. We will introduce you to the resources and skills necessary for nurturing the faith and putting into practice what you learn about God in your homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches. Our instruction also encourages students to address contemporary issues in an informed and responsible way.

A faculty and staff actively living out their faith in local churches carry out our mission. Although we are a very small school, the credentials and teaching of our full-time faculty is regularly recognized by their peers and our accrediting agency. I am convinced that in the coming months, you will come to appreciate the quality of education you are receiving from these professors. Likewise, you will find that our staff is very capable and ready to assist you with the non-academic necessities of this adventure.

If you excel in your work with us, and are so inclined, you will be well prepared to pursue advanced degrees at other institutions of higher learning. Several of our graduates have earned PhD’s. Others have gone on to medical and law schools. Still others are better equipped to serve the church and world as lay ministers. More importantly, those who have attended Austin Grad are faithfully serving God in churches across the United States as well as in places like Africa, Croatia, India, the Philippines, Russia, and South America.

Another important aspect of our school identity is the diversity seen in our student body. The ethnic, gender, age, and variety of Christian church traditions at Austin Grad is remarkable. This opens the door for a breadth of dialogue that is promising. As always, diversity brings certain challenges. Let us all remember that the time-honored definition, “faith seeking understanding,” is an ongoing process. As individuals, none of us has arrived at a full understanding of the faith. Likewise, no particular faith tradition has perfectly captured the essence of living out the faith. I am proud of how well we have navigated the inherent challenges of such diversity in the past. I anticipate us doing even better in the upcoming school year.

I say that to emphasize this. Although we are a school supported by churches and individuals from the faith tradition known as the Church of Christ, we welcome those of other traditions to join us in study and conversation. Our aim is not to proselytize those from other faith traditions into our tradition. Rather, our emphasis is on guiding you to discover the original meaning of the biblical text, reaching appropriate theological conclusions, and making practical applications of those conclusions in everyday life. This inevitably leads to discussions about differences. Such discussions are welcomed because

it is important for all of us to bring the particular practices of our churches under the scrutiny of Scripture. To those of you from other faith traditions, I promise that you and your faith tradition will be shown respect. I ask you to hold us accountable to this ideal.

Likewise, I ask the same measure of respect from you toward our faith tradition. There are certain understandings and practices at the School that reflect our heritage in the Churches of Christ. As the School's President, I have a responsibility to maintain and uphold the vision and mission of the school established by its founders and overseen by its board of trustees. I also have a responsibility to the donors and supporters of our School, most of whom are members of the Church of Christ.

I trust you will share my appreciation for those who built this school and for those who continue to support it with their financial resources. Because of their generosity, we are able to keep our tuition rate far lower than most other seminaries. Each of you is the direct beneficiary of such generosity.

I look forward to this journey of *faith seeking understanding*. Thank you for entrusting us with the privilege of serving as your guides on this adventure in theological education. We accept our role as a God-given responsibility. With God's grace and help, may we together grow in knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith, and more completely practice and pass on this faith. If it is done in the name of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and to the glory of God, then this adventure in theological education will be a worthwhile and life changing activity.

Stan Reid
28 Aug 06