

A LETTER *from the* DEAN



Dean Ray L. Hart

Dear Friends,

The most important thing we as a School can do is to step back from time to time and ask ourselves a simple but searching question. What is it that we are educating our students to be and do for the remainder of their lives?

No sooner than we state such a question, certain tapes start playing in our heads and governing what we say. So we start with mission statements—you know, the vision thing—and grand slogans, e.g., “We are preparing global leaders for a global church,” etc. And immediately there follow multiple stipulations: Remember, the School of Theology is not the church, either the local church or the global church. Remember, we are an academic institution, not a freestanding academic institution, but one set in a great private research university. Remember that we have to serve both church and university. The next thing you know, there’s a committee to draft or redraft a mission statement, then a committee of faculty and students to work with our Advisory Council and our Alumni Association. So committees ad infinitum, ad nauseum. Meanwhile the simple question—What are we educating our students to be and do for the remainder of their lives?—recedes into the primordial darkness whence the cosmos emerged.

As we ask ourselves what we are preparing our students to be and do, shouldn’t that be in the context of asking ourselves: Who is counting on us and what are they counting on us for? In the great final reckoning, which isn’t just final but daily, these very things count. Are we accountable, and indeed to a great company of witnesses?

We are a United Methodist seminary. What does that mean, what can it mean, what must it mean, now? In partial answer to that question, shouldn’t we at least take some leaves from the book of the modern missionary movement? We approach the centennial of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference (the exact year when the Truman Collins Chair in Mission, held now by our own Dana Robert, was inaugurated at BUSTH), the conference that started all the innovations in what it means to be “in mission.” Even then, it was evident that the center of Christianity was shifting from Europe and North America to the other hemisphere (which now is accomplished before our eyes), and that the various denominations were essentially taking Christianity, not their denominational carriers, to other lands. “Ecumenism” was born out of this realization. Is it not evident in all the U.S. mainline churches, not to mention the emergence of the non-denominational mega-churches, that denominationalism is largely dead? So I pose this question for us to ponder: Is God a Methodist?

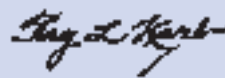
We are a Christian theological seminary. What does this mean, what can it mean, what must it mean? For over a century, late modernity has been said to be “post-Christian,” and many voices are being added constantly to this chorus. What does it mean to be a post-Christian Christian? I think we all agree that the whole of modernity is by its very nature post-Christendom, if by Christendom we understand a state-sponsored religion that ended with the demise of the Holy Roman Empire, and that certainly ended in principle with the Protestant Reformations. Notwithstanding the contemporary emergence of theocracies in Islamic cultures, and calls for America to be a Christian theocracy, do any of us really believe that our students will “be and do” in a culture of Christendom?

But a post-Christian culture, that is another matter, and given that anything bearing the name “Christian” will be attached importantly to Jesus, a critical question is: *Was* Jesus a Christian? *Is* Jesus—the Word now present to us by the Spirit in, through, by, and as Jesus—a Christian? I do not mean to approach the first question in the manner of all scholars who approach it in all forms of “the quest for the historical Jesus.” Almost uniformly they say Jesus was not a Christian. The first Christians (decisively important for subsequent Christianity) were Peter (sourcing Roman Catholicism) and Paul (sourcing Protestant Christianity). One could say that, for most of subsequent Christianity, the most influential of Jesus’

followers were post-Jesus Christians, and they and their tribe dominated not only the formation of the New Testament canon but also formed the “orthodox” beliefs of the Christian churches. Many, if not most, of the great reform movements have begun with the cry: “Away from the accretions of ‘Christianity’ and ‘back to Jesus!’”

I ask—Is Jesus a Christian?—not to answer it now, but to say that most of the people among whom our students will be and do, whatever else they are and do, are post-Christians. Is our students’ mission to win them to Christianity? To Christ? To Jesus? To what? To whom? Ought not such questions inform the shaping of our curriculum?

Our Faculty Curriculum Steering Committee has proposed that we begin our reflections by asking ourselves: What capacities do we hope to develop, shape, and nurture in our students? I think that is a splendid place to start. But there are other attendant questions I have raised here that should be in the picture as well. The capacities to be and do what? Our students count on us—faculty, alumni/ae, advisors—as we count on them. But who else is counting on them? And to what, or whom, are we all accountable?



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Dean