

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS OF THE GENERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY FACULTY

In the past two weeks, both legitimate questions and erroneous information have surfaced about our work stoppage. This is an attempt to set the record straight on some of those.

Q: What precipitated your communication with the Board of Trustees about conditions at GTS?

A: There was no single event that “broke the camel’s back” but rather the accumulated frustrations of the past 14 months over matters ranging from the curriculum to the scheduling of chapel services. In a short period, an atmosphere of collegiality and collaboration had become one of management by fiat where the views of the faculty were no longer invited and were, in fact, grounds for reprimand. Unprofessional and inappropriate comments by the Dean and President – made in public and in private – also contributed to making the situation intolerable.

By September, an accelerating series of exchanges between individual faculty members and Dean Dunkle demonstrated that our climate had become adversarial, prompting us to seek legal counsel and to begin the process of collectively organizing.

Q: Many people resist change in the workplace. Could it not be the case that Dean and President Dunkle was faced with some towering challenges when he came to GTS and is simply doing his best to meet them?

A: We are sympathetic with the financial challenges the Board and the Dean and President face. Our issues, though, are not about financial cutbacks or cost-saving measures but rather an environment in which students feel intimidated and unfairly scrutinized and faculty members are disrespected and have no voice in matters that are important to them including patterns of teaching and learning.

Q: Did you make a sincere effort to express your concerns and complaints with the Dean prior to going to the Board?

A: From the time of his arrival, Dean Dunkle has said he wanted “healthy communication” from faculty and students. In reality, however, he stifles not only any kind of dissent but even normal questions about policies and practices. Some areas of dissatisfaction, such as the completely disruptive moving of daily Chapel to 10 a.m., were raised in nearly every faculty meeting. Because of the breakdown in our communication with the dean, the faculty prevailed upon him to engage in a day-long meeting in May with a professional facilitator who specializes in communication and conflict resolution. But it had no lasting effect.

Q: Did the eight faculty members resign or not? Why is there a dispute about this?

A: There was never any intention to resign and we never used that word in any communication. Our goal was to have a businesslike conversation with the Board. We just wanted to be heard, which most leaders recognize is a fundamental human need. We have made it clear that we are prepared to return to the classroom as soon as we are allowed to, but the Board has effectively fired us. We believe the Dean and some members of the Board of Trustees have used our letter of complaint as an excuse to clean house, undoubtedly with the intention of bringing in a compliant faculty.

Interestingly, the Board has retained a nationally prominent law firm to conduct an investigation into the allegations made concerning Dean Dunkle's behavior. If that investigation does produce evidence of inappropriate conduct by the Dean – and if 80 percent of the faculty has been fired – where will that leave the board and GTS?

Q: You have said many students feel intimidated and unfairly scrutinized. What does that mean?

An example would be Dean Dunkle's chastising students for meeting to discuss a series of issues they wanted to raise with him. Rather than invite them to speak with him, when he learned of their meeting, we understand that he chastised them for having a "secret" meeting and was dismissive of their concerns. GTS is a "close," where students, faculty and the dean live, study and worship together, so contact among all members of the community is constant. More than once, including when having lunch with students, the dean has said that if people have trouble with authority at GTS, they should go somewhere else to study or work.

Q: One Board member has said that you were planning this current job action as long ago as June. Is that correct?

A: No. We did begin having conversations last spring and summer about the best ways to express our concerns, and we did draft a letter addressed to Dean Dunkle. But we reached no decisions at that time and did not send the letter. In August we decided to instead address our concerns directly to the Board, and we used some parts of the letter we had begun in June.

Q: Board Chair Bishop Sisk's letter to GTS students on October 7 says that he and the Executive Committee only recently became aware of the severity of the crisis and that they are "working non-stop behind the scenes in an effort to move as swiftly as possible toward reconciliation of the current crisis..." Are you actively engaged with Bishop Sisk and the trustees in a reconciliation effort?

A: We have accepted Bishop Sisk's invitation to meet with him and the Executive Committee on October 16.

As to when the Chair realized the seminary was in crisis, we leave it to others to decide whether he missed or ignored obvious signals. For certain he was informed in late May via a letter written by Dr. Good to Trustee Bishop Eugene Sutton and then in a follow-up

phone call with Bishop Sisk that we anticipated a major crisis with the Dean unless the Board intervened. It is correct, however, that before communicating with the Board, the faculty made every attempt to resolve the issues directly with the Dean. We, of course, were not privy to his communications with the Chair or Executive Committee.

For the October 16th meeting, we still have hope. It has become clear to us that we have tapped into a huge public conversation—an emerging movement, even, for a new and creative approach to theological education for a new model of being the Church. We think General Seminary can have a real and remarkable future as a center of theological education. How amazing it would be if our efforts toward reconciliation could include conversations for what is possible on the other side of this very difficult conflict.