

**The Sprunt Lecture Series**  
**Union Presbyterian Seminary**  
**200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration**  
**Mindy Douglas Adams**  
**May 9, 2012**

Good morning, Union Presbyterian Seminary!  
The Lord be with you.  
This is the day the Lord has made.

I can't begin to tell you how excited I am to be with you this week as we celebrate together the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our beloved Union Presbyterian Seminary. It has been a privilege to hear the wisdom, insight and faithfulness of John, Katie, Laura, and Craig over the past two days. What a delight to be with colleagues, friends, current and former professors and to have the opportunity to meet new sisters and brothers in Christ. Union has been and continues to be a strong and faithful institution of theological education and higher learning, training leaders in the Presbyterian Church (USA) as well as leaders in many other denominations. My years here in the early nineties were some of the most formative and happiest years of my life. I, like so many of you, received a theological education at the highest level in this place and was prepared by faithful and wise professors and administrators to enter into ministry and service in the Presbyterian Church. I continue to be proud to claim Union Presbyterian Seminary as my alma mater and am endlessly grateful and deeply humbled to be a part of this week's lecture series.

I am not here because I have any profound and revelatory scholarly insights. I am not here because I give frequent lectures on the state of the church. I am simply here because I, like many of you, am out there in the trenches, as they say, doing the work of ministry God has called us to do.

I am also here because things have changed out there in the world over the past several decades and all is not as it once was and we are navigating new and sometimes scary waters. So I am here to give voice to what many alumni in active ministry are facing every day – a world vastly different culturally, religiously, technologically and socially than it was when most of us graduated and began to serve the church. What worked 50, 25, even 10-15 years ago doesn't work now and being a leader in the church is an ever-changing challenge with few opportunities for repetition of old models and absolutely no opportunity for complacency.

The culture around us has shifted and we who are out there doing ministry are trying our best to keep our balance.

David Lose, Preaching Professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, recognizes these shifts:

“... the Christian story [he writes] no longer holds the cultural center of gravity but is one of any number of larger stories, or metanarratives, that seek to provide ultimate meaning. While a generation ago church leaders complained that we lived in a nominally Christian culture, today’s leaders nostalgically reminisce that it was at least nominally Christian.”<sup>1</sup>

I imagine this statement rings true for you, at least in some way. In the 1950s, many Union seminary students (some of you) graduated to serve in one of the mainline denominations whose story held that *cultural center of gravity*. In that decade, students could be assured that if they stayed in the United States, and particularly in the south, they would serve a church whose members attended worship every week without fail, Sunday school every week without fail, rarely missed Wednesday night services, Bible studies and circle meetings, and had attendance pins to prove it.

Graduating students knew they would serve a congregation who had always been in the same denomination. They knew their members, a homogeneous crew for the most part, would be baptized, lifelong Christians who were active in the ministries of the church.

Back then, the pastor played a significant role as a part of this cultural center of gravity. He (and it would have been a he) held a position of honor and authority in the community, highly respected as a professional and one to whom elected officials would often turn for support or guidance.

Today, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other mainline denominations no longer hold that cultural center of gravity.

The reasons for these shifts are many.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Thriving Seminaries Admit What They Don’t Know,” an article for the online Patheos Progressive Christian Portal, November 10, 2011.

**Over the past 40 years, our world has encountered rapid changes in technology and communication.** And the changes increase exponentially year after year.

About the time when I graduated seventeen years ago, I set up my first email account. Now granted, I wasn't on the cutting edge of technology, but I wasn't *that* far behind, either. I figured out how to use the email account on my seven-inch dual color Macintosh computer. I was proud of myself. I had no idea what was coming.

When I was in seminary, I didn't use the internet. To research a topic, I didn't surf the world-wide-web. I surfed the card catalog or ran my fingers across the titles in the theology section of the library.

I didn't email my professors, or friends, or family.

Facebook didn't exist; people didn't tweet, text, or have voice-recognition phones.

I had no idea what a blog was, or that I would ever write one.

Seventeen years ago when I was in seminary, the only ways I thought I would be communicating with my parishioners were by a land-line phone call (although we wouldn't have used that term) and by a letter delivered by the postal service.

That was then.

Now, I keep a mental notebook in my head which reminds me the best ways to communicate with the members and friends of my congregation. Janet and Margaret are the only two who still prefer a call or a letter. Most members in their 50s and 60s, 70s and 80s prefer email. The 30 and 40-year-olds use a variety of forms of communication. 20s prefer text messages. Teens like Facebook. I use multiple methods of communication every day to stay in touch with my congregation.

Technological advancements constantly change and challenge the way we communicate with our congregations and our ministry partners. If we are going to be able to lead in a world that is connected in so many ways, we pastors, educators, and church leaders must stay on the cutting edge of technology in whatever ways we can. So, indeed, must our seminary professors and staff.

**Over the years, the cities and towns of this nation have also seen a dramatic increase in religious and cultural diversity.**

I grew up in a little town nestled in the foothills of South Carolina and entrenched in the Bible belt. The religious landscape around me consisted of one Methodist church, one Presbyterian church, one Roman Catholic church, one AME Zion church and hundreds of little Baptist and Church of God churches splattered all over the county in every direction. Episcopalians were foreigners in those parts. Our youth group took a field trip to the closest Lutheran church one year, 25 miles away, and thought we were really pushing our religious boundaries.

These days I look around my community and see evidence of every religion imaginable – Protestants of every persuasion, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Greek Orthodox, Orthodox Jews, Reformed Jews, Muslims, Zen Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and of course, a multitude of non-denominational churches. They worship in traditional sanctuaries, temples, and mosques. They worship in coffee shops, bars, houses, restaurants, storefronts, and movie theaters. They worship on Friday night, or on Saturday morning or Saturday night, or on Sunday morning or Sunday night, or any number of other times during the week.

I look around my community and see people of multiple races, from many different cultures and countries. In my local health-food market I hear neighbors speaking languages I can’t identify. I hear Spanish in the hospitals and schools. My son has good friends from Taiwan, Korea, Sweden, and Mexico. The face of our towns and schools and markets has changed for the better and presents us with opportunities for richer, fuller, and more diverse ministries in Christ.

Many of you can speak to the reality of immigrant and refugee populations arriving in your city or town from countries all around the world – from Asia, Africa, North, Central and South America. These immigrants and refugees often cluster in communities together. Some start their own churches, while others look for worshipping communities that will welcome them into their midst. Presbyterian churches around the nation, maybe your own, have welcomed these communities with open arms, but in doing so face vastly different linguistic, cultural, and theological challenges (and I would argue opportunities) than they have ever faced before.

**Another difference in the church from the 50s and the church of today is the shift in denominational loyalty.** Presbyterian churches today are no longer

predominantly populated by people who have been Presbyterian all their lives. Those folks are there, but they are surrounded by people from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds. A recent new member class I led included individuals from Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Holiness backgrounds. Our newly elected ruling elders and deacons include former Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists in addition to a few lifelong Presbyterians. People no longer move to town and look for *their* brand of Protestantism. Instead, if they look at all, they go church-shopping until they find the place that feels right, the place that welcomes them, the place where they find energy and joy and passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and most importantly, it seems, relevance.

**Perhaps this points to the biggest difference of all – our culture has evolved from a culture of duty and obligation to a culture that promotes independence and non-conformity, and celebrates a world full of options.**

David Lose again,

[W]e have moved from the age of duty, [he writes] when we did things because we knew we should, to the age of discretion (think “discretionary time and income”), when we make decisions about our commitments based in part on determining what’s in it for me. In a 24/7 world of endless opportunities, obligations, and information, many adults exercise an exacting, if often unconscious, formula for time management based on immediate and tangible rewards and will no longer dedicate an hour on Sunday morning to something that doesn’t help them make sense of the other 167 hours of their week.<sup>2</sup>

Diana Butler Bass, in her recent book *Christianity after Religion*, knows that choice plays a big role in today’s culture. She writes,

Americans, even those of modest means, exercise more choices in a single day than some of our ancestors did in a month or perhaps even a year. From the moment we awaken, we are bombarded with choices – from caffeinated or decaffeinated . . . to what sort of spinach to buy to go with dinner (local, organic, fresh, frozen, chopped, whole leaf, bagged, or bunched).

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, “Thriving Seminaries Admit What They Don’t Know,” an article for the online Patheos Progressive Christian Portal, November 10, 2011.

In a world of choice, [continues Bass] obligatory religions are not faring well. How can religion actually obligate anyone to come? What is a church to do? Threaten people with the eternal torments of hell? . . . Refuse people the Mass? . . . Refuse to baptize their children? No worries. Someone else will. Or maybe they just won't bother.<sup>3</sup>

Truthfully, lots of folk these days choose that last option - they don't bother going to church at all. They chose the *New York Times* and a cup of coffee. They choose their kids' soccer game, baseball game, or swim meet. They choose the golf course, or the bike ride, or the farmer's market. Church is no longer what everyone does on Sunday morning. It's simply one option among many.

And as just another option, church often gets relegated to the bottom of the list of choices when it **no longer speaks with relevance to what happens in life.**

Bass quotes a post on her blog by someone in their 40s:

"I increasingly find the Catholic church and mainline Protestant churches to be irrelevant. Many churchgoers seem to be content with the status quo and are uncomfortable being challenged, especially on the issues of social justice. We are currently experiencing the death throes of a dinosaur."<sup>4</sup>

Another woman posted "I feel most churches are way too fixed on self-preservation and preaching the gospel rather than living it."<sup>5</sup>

Later Bass shares a post on her website from Paul, a pastor who, along with his wife, has no further use for a church without a vision, without a mission:

After over 20 years in parish ministry [Paul writes] I am leaving it. My wife . . . is also leaving the church. . . . Yet, we are sad to leave, because of what it means. It means the church has become irrelevant to us. We care about spiritual disciplines of study, worship, confession and forgiveness, discernment, fellowship, and mission. In the church, I spent more time discussing the replacement of the church roof than on discerning our purpose as a church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, (New York: HarperOne 2012), p. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Bass, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Bass, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Bass, p. 76.

In a response to a blog by Presbyterian Teaching Elder Carol Howard Merritt on shifts in the way we do church, a man named Mark writes:

It's not just the 20-30-somethings who are shying away from church. Some of us 40- and 50-somethings . . . have lost interest. Why commit to an organization unwilling to commit to you, to listen to you, to understand you. . . ? It's not just the socio-economic and generational prejudices, either. It's also the doctrinaire attitude – even among so-called liberals – that leads some of us to say, “Why bother with the Church?” It's a shame, really, that I grew up but the Church didn't [he writes]. I'd like the Church to make room for those of us whose spirituality, theology, and view of scripture matured beyond 5<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday School. If the Church won't do that, I'm forced to look elsewhere for a faith community.<sup>7</sup>

Friends, when our seminary students graduate, they enter this world.

- **A technological world with multiple ways to communicate;**
- **a culturally, racially, linguistically and religiously diverse world;**
- **a world full of endless options;**
- **and a world longing for relevance.**

And it's not the same world of decades past.

But here's the thing. No matter what the culture looks like, our church leaders still need to know the Bible and the biblical languages. No matter how many ways we can communicate technologically, our church leaders still need to be able to think *theologically* and lead their congregations to do the same. No matter how diverse the community is, our church leaders still need to be able to communicate effectively through preaching and teaching and leading worship. No matter how irregularly people come to worship or how unwilling they are to change, our church leaders still need to be able to give pastoral care to those who need it.

However, too many of our seminaries and too many of our professors (though not all, by any means) are continuing to structure curricula, plan class syllabi, and give lectures the way they always have because if it has worked for them in the past, for generations in some cases, why should they change? No one knows what these supposed changes should look like anyway, and it's scary to step away from a formula which has always worked in the past. So in too many cases our

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<sup>7</sup> Comment posted by Mark on September 25, 2011 on *Call and Response Blog*, [www.faithandleadership.com](http://www.faithandleadership.com), “Carol Howard Merritt: Five cultural shifts that should affect the way we do church.”

seminaries, just like too many of our churches, as Stanley Ott likes to say, are simply applying more diligently the practices and lectures that worked in the past instead of creatively embracing new models of doing seminary and leading the church into the future.

In this day and age, even the most theologically sound, biblically trained student, even the best preacher or teacher in the class – even the one most adept at giving pastoral care – even the top-of-the-class-model-seminary-student will crash and burn in the church of today if he or she cannot help a congregation cast a vision which embraces change, or does not have the tools to deal with family power systems, or is unable to communicate in a variety of ways, or does not have skills for leadership development. Even the most faithful and optimistic graduates will also lose energy for ministry and perhaps even lose faith without strong mentors in place or without a network of supportive colleagues who are navigating the same shifting sands of church and culture around them.

So what is to be done?

I am happy to say that Union Presbyterian Seminary is already doing a great deal to respond to the changes in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. With three campuses – Richmond, Charlotte, and the Extended Campus online – Union is responding to our culture's need for accessibility and flexibility.

Union also uses technology in the classroom and out of the classroom, encouraging students, professors and staff to stay connected through the many forms of technology available to them.

Union has an excellent website which is easy to navigate and incorporates tools such as the Blackboard and Student Portal, as well as a job board called Union Exchange which invites students and graduates alike to view job postings and internships and apply online.

Union has a webcasting service which is designed to provide programs on topics that are relevant to pastors, church leaders, alums, laity, and anyone interested in theological education.

Union has a Leadership Institute and has recently started a summer program for new students called Communities of Learning. These communities partner new students with local alumni mentors and faculty, providing for a place of learning and guidance.



Union has already established a curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recognizing the changes necessary to move forward in faithful formation of church leaders for this new world.

Union also has alums all over the world who are participating in God's work as they vision new church developments, as Bob Dunham, our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary distinguished alum, did in his vision for the new church – the church I now have the privilege of serving. Others are visionary and supporting new models for doing ministry to a new generation of Christian women and men, like Ed McLeod at First, Raleigh, as they explore Friday evening ministry models for the young adults who gather downtown each weekend.

President Brian Blount and other faculty, staff, and board members are aware of the need to respond to the changing culture around us and are constantly exploring new avenues and possibilities for theological education.

Yet as exciting as all of this is, there is still more that can be done.

I do not presume to have any miraculous answers or quick fixes. Scholars, preachers, church leaders and writers far wiser and more insightful than I have approached this question for longer periods of time.

But having walked the road of new church development, having had innumerable conversations about the future of theological education with seminary presidents, deans, professors and members of the Committee on Theological Education, having talked with my local and national colleagues endlessly about how the changes in culture affect the church, having met with recent seminary graduates – some in a call, some searching for a call, I do have some thoughts.

The **first** and perhaps most important thing we need to do – as church leaders and as theological educators - **is to acknowledge the change around us**. Our culture will not ever go back to the way things were in the 50s, 70s, 90s, or even the first decade of this new millennium. We continue to move forward, and move forward rapidly. The sooner we embrace this fact, as I know President Blount and many others here at Union have done, the sooner we can move forward without fear.

“I am about to do a new thing,” God says. And we know throughout history that God constantly does new things in our midst.

God did a new thing at Union, as President Blount shared with us in his lecture at the alumni luncheon yesterday, when the seminary moved from Farmville to Richmond, from the country to the city.

God did a new thing at Union when the seminary actively participated in the civil rights movement.

God did a new thing at Union when the seminary began to admit women to be trained as ordained Teaching Elders.

God did a new thing at Union when Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education joined together.

God is doing a new thing now as our homosexual brothers and sisters can now live openly as they were created and seek ordination upon graduation.

God constantly does new things in our midst. God calls us to be open to God's movement among us. God calls us to look to the future without fear, to take risks, to try new models and methods, while remaining faithful to the message of the Gospel and to our theological foundation. We are the Presbyterian Church. "The Church reformed and always being reformed." That's who we are and who we have been and who we will be.

The **second** and more challenging thing we can do is **continue to stand on the foundational teachings of our church (Bible, theology, history, education, and worship), while, at the same time learn how to train leaders to serve the people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** This will require that we constantly be in communication with one another – across seminary and presbytery and church lines – across administrative lines – across classroom lines - as we explore answers to the question - *How do our seminaries teach foundationally and also stay relevant to today's society, graduating students who can provide transformational Christian leadership in this brave new world?*

People in this institution and people in other national institutions are thinking about this question and propose answers almost daily.

A couple of years ago the Committee on Theological Education's Joint Committee on Leadership Needs, led by our own President Blount, presented a paper to our denomination called "Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God." In this paper, Blount and his colleagues discuss the changing culture around us and explore the

gifts and skills needed for this new religious and social environment. The paper lifts up several character traits as biblical qualities that are especially relevant for leadership today:

**Transparency:** People are able to see Christ through the leader

**Authenticity:** The leader assumes appropriate responsibility, proclaiming the Gospel honestly and truthfully, and living a life that demonstrates the Gospel

**Servanthood:** Ministry is —not about us, but rather about God

**Vulnerability:** It is in our fragility, weakness, and humanness, rather than in our presumed adequacy, that God’s transcendent power is most clearly evident.<sup>8</sup>

The paper continues with a discussion of how leaders with these characteristics can be educated and nurtured to do ministry in our current cultural climate. The Joint Committee on Leadership Needs argues, and I agree, that such leadership formation must be done not just in our seminaries but in partnership with church sessions and presbyteries. The paper argues that “these joint efforts would emphasize working together as church bodies and schools to:

Cultivate missional leadership formation

Stimulate character formation

Form people in discipleship, spiritual disciplines, and missional practices

Teach awareness of church systems: how they are formed, and how to cultivate change within them

Imagine new forms of engaging our communities

Prepare evangelists as new church development pastors and for other community-based ministries

Develop cultural awareness, sensitivity, and intercultural competence

Increase biblical knowledge, literacy, and understanding

Shape creative worship leaders”<sup>9</sup>

What if our seminaries modeled their curricula with these objectives in mind? What if professors teaching foundational classes considered the ways such objectives could become a part of their class syllabi? What if a summer leadership

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<sup>8</sup> *Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God: A Report of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),* Joint Committee on Leadership Needs, The Committee on Theological Education, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> “Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God” paper, p. 5.

institute were established with this list of objectives as a guiding vision for seminars and classes available to students for credit and to others for continuing education? What if seminary didn't *reinvent* the wheel, but found some new methods for turning it?

Philip Clayton, Dean of Claremont School of Theology, believes that “emergent” theological education must take a twofold approach to preparing students to become church leaders in this vastly different world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Part of our role [he argues] is **to prepare men and women for ministries within the institutional church . . .** But emergent seminaries don't see existing institutions as ends-in-themselves; we work to adapt them to new realities – sometimes radically. . . . The most effective change agents are often found at the heart of institutions.

Equally important [Clayton continues] is to **produce leaders for the church that is to come**. Here there are, as of yet, few institutions. But there is a movement – or more accurately, many movements – and there are brilliant leaders. . . . There are best practices in Christian blogging and podcasting, new church starts, the “new monasticism,” house-church leadership, use of social media and the arts, and the myriad new forms of local activism. Will seminaries . . . be at the forefront, researching experimental forms of church and ministry as they are developed and passing the results on to a new generation of leaders?<sup>10</sup>

This is a big question. Will seminaries be at the forefront? Will Union Presbyterian Seminary be at the forefront? And what will that look like if we are? These, I believe, are the questions we have been asking and should continue to ask together - constantly – how can our seminaries produce faithful, visionary and hopeful leaders who can be prophetic in the midst of the institution, and how can we produce faithful, visionary and innovative leaders who can lead the Church of Jesus Christ into the decades of change ahead of us? How can we determine the ways we are held captive to older models that prevent us from moving forward creatively with a strong vision for the future?

As Association of Theological Schools Executive Director Daniel Aleshire writes,

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Clayton, “An Emergent Seminary for an Emerging Church,” October 17, 2011 on *Patheos* Progressive Christian Portal blog.

If theological schools are to serve the church as well in the future as they have in the past, change is going to be required.

Fortunately these institutions are schools, [he writes] and their institutional capacity and educational knowledge provide the necessary resources to make thoughtful and appropriate changes. They have changed in the past, and are capable of changing in the future. Institutions do not change quickly, and they don't change radically at any one moment. But they do change over time and the accrual of that change can be dramatic [writes Aleshire]. One of the strengths of theological schools, as institutions, is that they not only change but can do so in a way that preserves the best of the heritage from which they come.<sup>11</sup>

The Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God paper knows that this change is not only possible, but it is also transformationally hopeful:

The transitional, in-between time in which we live creates anxiety and fear [the paper states], but it also offers great hope and exciting new opportunities for the reformation and renewal of the church and its mission. Ultimately, our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ expressed in the Spirit of God alive and well in our world.<sup>12</sup>

Union Presbyterian Seminary has leaders who are already moving forward and seeking to make thoughtful adjustments and to take courageous risks that respond to the changes in leadership needs in the world around us while preserving the best of the heritage from which they come. Union Presbyterian Seminary has made other major adjustments over the past two hundred years of her existence. I have no doubt she will be a leader in making the changes necessary to serve Christ into the future.

“I am about to do a new thing,” God says. “Will you join me?”

Come on, folks. Let's do it!

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), pp. 139-140.

<sup>12</sup> “Raising up Leaders for the Mission of God” paper, p. 7.