

August 2019 Board Notes—Dr. Tex Sample, SPST Board Chair

The Saint Paul Miracle

In 2017 Saint Paul School of Theology was placed on probation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), our regional accreditation agency. The HLC report named 19 correctives the school was required to make, a major challenge by any measurement. In this regard, it is important to note that the academic quality of our faculty was never in question. Rather, the correctives dealt with program reviews, measures of institutional effectiveness, evaluation of student learning and program learning outcomes, multiyear budgeting, progress on our strategic plan, documentation on enrollment and financial management data, explication of the scope of the Doctor of Ministry program in Korea, the use of human subjects in research, the integration of budgeting with the full range of the school's life, the engagement of the Trustees, and the like. We were fortunate to increase giving the past three fiscal years even with the threat of probation.

Reverend Neil Blair became president at Saint Paul on July 1, 2016 and the school received the HLC probation notice in March of 2017. Before Blair's presidency there were three one-year interim presidents in a row. These were skilled and able people but two were limited to one-year terms due to health issues. The third left the President's office when Neil Blair took the job. The school was in financial trouble and had suffered sizable losses in the endowment with the economic crash of 2008 and its aftermath. With a budget in excess of \$5 million per year, too much of the endowment was being spent to cover financial losses. Recruitment and enrollment suffered, in part, due to the probationary status. Our Kansas campus was divided with classrooms located at the Church of the Resurrection and the faculty offices at Fox Hill. There were morale issues and deep concern among administration, faculty, staff, students, and trustees. Our Oklahoma campus needed greater attention, especially in relationship with the United Methodist churches in Oklahoma and the Annual Conference. We needed more effective and appropriate engagement of our Board of Trustees. More issues could be named, but we were caught in a perfect storm.

The school set about to rectify these concerns and cut the budget from \$5 million to \$3.5 million, which required buyouts to retiring professors and a reduction of staff. Mr. Matt Mills, Chief Financial Officer/Chief Operating Officer, has been key in the financial and operational oversight of the budget, especially in the coordination of the financial and institutional well-being of the seminary. Neil Blair's extraordinary fund-raising capacities had stunning results. In his first year he raised \$635,802 from all donors and received an increase from Saint Paul Council members, i.e., those giving a thousand dollars a year or more. This represented a 40% increase in the number of Council members. In his second year that figure increased to \$640,412. He began a capital campaign and thus far has raised \$900,000 of the goal of \$1.1 million, which should be completed by the end of December 2019. We are now among the top ten percent of free-standing seminaries in financial strength in the United States. The capital campaign provided funds to remodel the East building of the Church of the Resurrection to consolidate the faculty offices onsite. Through the good graces of the Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of Church of the Resurrection, and the work of President Neil Blair, an equitable lease was signed for this location, which was well below market prices. New, cutting edge technology was placed in both the Kansas and Oklahoma campus buildings in order to enhance hybrid and online learning, also made possible through campaign funding.

The administration created the Institutional Advancement Team led by Dr. Angela Sims to focus on recruitment, communication through all media outlets, and monthly video updates. In addition, President Blair also set up monthly sessions with students and others in order to respond to their concerns. To strengthen our work on our Oklahoma campus, the school recently hired Dr. Anne Walker as Director of SPST at the Oklahoma City University site. We are excited about her strengths and look forward to the

impact of her work. Also, the school recently invited Dr. Casey Sigmon to join the faculty as Professor of Worship and Preaching and of Contextual Education. The Board received a grant from the In Trust Foundation that allowed three Trustees and President Blair to travel to Vancouver, Washington, for a seminar on the work of boards in theological schools. This seminar focused on board governance and related concerns. In the near future we plan to work on the relationships of the trustees and faculty as the final phase of this grant. Over the last three years the Board has been led by Chair Dr. Michael Parmely, whose leadership has been remarkable, indeed, and who was recently elected a life-long trustee by the Board of Trustees.

Our Resource Committee now coordinates all expenditures with our budget, our strategic plan, and the actions of other key committees of the school. Meanwhile, our Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee continues to work with the Strategic Plan 2017 – 2025 and will specifically address the goals from the plan in the areas of recruitment and enrollment, collaborations and partnerships with other institutions, and the development of innovative educational delivery systems. The Governance Committee has developed a Presidential Succession Plan, which provides important direction for the future. The Academic Committee oversees the work of the faculty, which has rigorously pursued new curricular and instructional developments under the leadership of Vice President and Academic Dean Dr. Jeanne Hoeft. The Flex Initiative, for example, opened new resources for online teaching; the faculty began a review of academic programs that focused this past year on the Master of Arts in Theological Studies and the Doctor of Ministry; and they are developing a relationship with Quality Matters, a consultative organization that trains teachers for online instruction. This past year has been busy with the faculty learning new technologies, developing courses, reworking the D.Min. and the MATS programs, and engaging in student assessment and student learning objectives. Recently, we have had four resignations from the Board. We wish each of these former Trustees the very best in their continued pursuit of the common good.

Saint Paul was, of course, removed from probation this year. All of the correctives were made with only two things that will continue to be monitored, which are recruitment and student assessment. Both of these areas are presently receiving a great deal of attention. Rev. Shannon Hancock, Director of Admissions and Recruitment and Dr. Melissa Pearce, Director of Alumni Relations and Collaborative Partnerships, are productively at work on recruitment, and, while we will not have a final count of incoming students until September, it looks right now as though the goal for this year will be met. Significant progress has been made in the areas of student assessment and student learning objectives. Things look good indeed.

In preparation for its last meeting on July 22 – 23, the Board created an Ad Hoc Committee to prepare a day-long session led by President Blair for the Board to respond to the consultation notes from Bill Riley following the May 2019 Board meeting. This was a productive session in which the Board responded to three major questions: Where are we? Where are we going? And why? Representatives of the faculty and Friends of Saint Paul were present at the meeting. These types of sessions bond relationships, build community, and open the future with new ideas and commitments. At its last meeting in July 2019, the Board took an action to support the four commitments of the UMC Next in opposition to the Traditionalist Plan adopted at the General Conference of 2019.

We have seen a miracle at Saint Paul these last three years, not in the sense of some intervention in the processes of nature, but rather in the sense that God has been actively and perceptibly working in our midst. The turnaround is dramatic; the future looks open and inviting. We celebrate all that has been done. The Administration, the Staff, the Faculty, the Students, the Trustees, the Alums, and the Donors have worked together to make major changes in very constructive directions. It is a good day.