

**Saint Paul School of Theology Board Notes**  
**March 2021**  
**Tex Sample, Chair**

**Contract Extension for President Neil Blair**

The Saint Paul Board of Trustees extended President Neil Blair's contract through June 30, 2024. This contract extension followed a four-year review of the President's work and found that President Blair successfully completed the goals mutually set by the Trustees and him over the previous four years. A survey was sent to Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Alumni, and Students to provide anonymous feedback that was included in this evaluation. In addition, a summary of interviews with school constituents conducted by Dr. Mildred Edwards, a consultant who worked with the Trust and Collaboration Taskforce on eleven institutional issues, was included.

Subsequent to the decision to extend President Blair's contract, meetings were held with the Executive Leadership Team, as well as Faculty and Staff to review with each the process that the Governance Committee and the Trustees followed leading to the Board's decision. This was an important effort to recognize the importance of their feedback and a new step in communicating with SPST constituents. We especially want to thank Mark Faulkner, Chair of the Governance Committee of the Board, and Trustees Dana Aldridge and Linda Shipman for their excellent work in the evaluation process of the President. We look forward to the coming years under the leadership of President Blair.

**Trust and Collaboration Taskforce**

The Trust and Collaboration Taskforce has been actively at work. As reported above, the Taskforce hired Dr. Mildred Edwards as a consultant to conduct interviews with Saint Paul constituencies around issues of trust and collaboration, which resulted in 52 pages of text that were summarized to address key themes. Emerging from these are three important areas for the school to give serious attention.

The first is vision. The school had previously gone through a difficult time of financial instability, declining enrollments, and four presidents during a four-year period. The decision to move to the Church of the Resurrection campus was a contested one, which created problems of trust, especially around issues of communication, management, and decision-making. During this time reduction of staff and faculty further contributed to a sense of insecurity among school constituents. Then, in 2017 the school was placed on probation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) with 19 notifications. The last four years or so has included a time of hard work by Administration, Faculty, Staff, and Trustees. The school did abide by its Strategic Plan of 2017 – 2025 and updated it and the hard work paid off. The school was removed from probation by the HLC with no notifications, and as you will see below in the Resource Committee Report, the school is financially in a very good place. However, work around a larger vision and issues of communication and management did not get as much as attention as they deserved. It is now time for the school to make a pivot to build on the solid financial grounding we now have to develop a new vision for the years to come.

Second is communication. Although Board meetings of the Trustees and its Committees are open to anyone, with the Board's meeting calendar and agendas available on the school's website, nevertheless additional means of communication are needed across the institution.

Third is management. Certain issues have arisen, especially in terms of hearing concerns of Faculty and Staff and developing regularized practices for feedback from these constituencies. For example, when comments or evaluations are requested from these groups, reports back to them about how their input was utilized become important in building trust and a collaborative spirit. This means that in both communication processes and management, the school needs to develop a number of best practices, which can become part of the basic operational procedures. Naming these best practices and developing their proper use in the institution are now underway.

## **Saint Paul Finances**

At the last Resource Committee meeting COO/CFO Matthew Mills provided the following summary:

Saint Paul has sufficient and stable financial resources to achieve its mission with educational quality and financial sustainability. The following reasons give confidence that the school can maintain these structures into the future:

1. Saint Paul operates with no debt
2. The school has a balanced budget with a 4%-5% endowment draw target
3. The endowment is 8-10 times the size of its annual expenses
4. The school operates with enough cash to cover six months of expenses in its checking account
5. Saint Paul has diversified revenue streams, which includes four different areas (tuition, endowment draw, fundraising, other) with no area representing more than 37% or less than 15%

In spite of COVID-19, Saint Paul has surpassed its stated financial goals. President Blair has remained committed to the annual budget and stays in close communication with the CFO and the President's Executive Leadership Team. The first half of the 2020 – 2021 fiscal year has the following financial accomplishments:

1. Seminary tuition revenue is up 9% year-over-year
2. The budget is \$433,331 ahead of target – considering our annual budget is \$3.7 million, this is quite a feat
3. The Seminary operations are fully funded out of operations with no endowment drawdowns – the Seminary used to fully draw the entire portion in July to fund operations

This is an extraordinary report. Saint Paul is now 17th from the top in financial stability among free-standing seminaries in the United States.

## **Academic Affairs**

Vice President and Academic Dean Jeanne Hoeft provided a good report on the assessment of student learning outcomes and educational effectiveness. While there is not room in this space for the full report, here are some key findings:

- Student impressions of their learnings are generally strong
- Overall satisfaction with classroom experiences is high
- Retention and Persistence rates remain high and above benchmarks
- Overall scores for educational effectiveness remain in the effective to very effective range. Areas for improvement are being identified and measures taken to address them.

Rabbi Michael Zedek has been named Rabbi-In-Residence beginning the Fall of 2021. After serving as Chief Executive Officer of the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati and Senior Rabbi at Emanuel Congregation in Chicago, Rabbi Zedek returns to the Kansas City Metro Area, where he previously ministered as Senior Rabbi at Temple B'nai Jehudah and worked as a Saint Paul Adjunct Professor in Bible and Midrash from 1985 to 1991. In his new role as Rabbi-in-Residence, he will serve part-time, teaching courses in Judaism and interreligious dialogue and collaboration, as well as advising students on what "every Christian minister should know about Judaism." We warmly welcome Rabbi Zedek in this new role at Saint Paul.

## **Faculty Development**

Saint Paul is presently engaged in a faculty search for an assistant professor in Ethics and Church and Society. Candidates gave lecture presentations and interviews via Zoom during February 2021. It is expected that we will have a person named to the position within the next couple of weeks.

### **The Association of Theological Schools Self-Study (ATS)**

Saint Paul is currently involved in preparation for the ATS Self-Study. Documents are being written, and things look good. The ATS Self-Study Team will be on campus September 27 – 28, 2021.

### **The Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee**

The Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee has focused previously on two goals:

- To carefully recruit a diverse student body
- To identify and cultivate collaborative and partnerships with seminaries, colleges, universities, churches, and other organizations

Careful attention has been given to these over the last 2 ½ years. They will continue to be carefully monitored.

Two new goals have been identified for the future:

- To employ a faculty that addresses the changing realities of church and world. The soon-to-be hired new professor in Ethics and Church and Society is a clear step in this direction.
- To create an environment of cultural awareness, diversity, equality, and social justice on the Saint Paul campus and other learning environments. This goal is presently being pursued by faculty work on intercultural awareness and by special study opportunities at Board of Trustee meetings on racial ethnic issues and racism and on the issue of homosexuality before the General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

### **New Trustees**

We are pleased to announce the addition of two new trustees, Ms. Sharon Cleaver and Mr. Rogers Strickland.

Ms. Cleaver is the Senior Director of Marketing, Communications, and Public Relations for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City. She has a long and loyal record of community service and is a member of the Saint James United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Missouri. She is a member of the Trustee Class of 2024 and serves on the Academic Committee and the Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee.

Mr. Strickland is the founder and CEO of Strickland construction, founder and partner of Attic Storage, and founder and sole proprietor of Strickland Farms. A member of the Weston United Methodist Church, he has spent many years building houses and fundraising for the poor in Guatemala. Also, a member of the Class of 2024, he serves on the Governance Committee and Resource Committee.