

Walking Wisely

Proverbs 15.30-33; James 3.13-18

by Steven A. Hayner

“The Lord be with you! And also with you!” It’s a small ritual repeated many times a day around here, but for me it’s important. It’s important as a teacher that I can bless you with this reminder—and that you remind me that God is with me as well. We invoke the presence of the Trinity—for the work we do, the truths we ponder, and the way we treat each other.—because everything we do has eternal consequences. It reminds me that we live and study and grow in the presence of the Lord—and that means we treat each other well, and we learn together with humble spirits. We are neither the final authority—nor do we lord it over each other.

When we bless each other by invoking the presence of God, we claim the reality of God’s work: the diversity of the Creator, the reconciliation of the Savior, the empowering presence of the Sustainer. The Lord is with us as wind and fire—as the one who is mysteriously at work, and at the same time lights our way.

Today I recognize again how much our call as a seminary is beyond—always beyond—our abilities. I know that many of you would like to hear me talk today about what I see as the future of Columbia—and perhaps even about my bold new plan. But I don’t have such a plan. In my first months as president what I do have is a renewed vision of our call as a community. And I have a lot of joy! And what is our call? As an institution our call is framed by three questions:

1. What is God doing in the world?
2. What is the church called to be and to do to participate in God’s work in the world?
3. How can we nourish yet another generation of leaders for the Church?

God has called us to nourish leaders—to be a center of leadership development—for the church. We are called to make disciples—to nourish, to educate, to inspire, and always to point each other to Jesus, who is “the author and perfecter of our faith.”

God has called us to a great mission and has entrusted us with enormous resources.

- We have a faculty full of talented, productive, committed, exceptional scholars and teachers, who even more importantly are first-class people. They love God; they love each other; they love the church; and they love Christ’s work throughout the world.
- We have a staff and a Board of Trustees full of deeply committed, creative, hard-working professionals, who serve all of us with both excellence and good stewardship. They constantly help us be more than we can afford.
- We have students and alumni who believe that the call of God to serve the world through the church is worthy of a lifetime of faithful loving and sacrifice.
- We have a library full of research and teaching resources—and a campus which has become a place sanctified by work done here, by the decisions made here, and by the steps of daily obedience taken here.

In the 1920s, the leaders of Columbia took a bold step to move the seminary to Atlanta—and to build a state of the art facility where faculty, staff and students could live and learn together how to encourage and to resource the Church in what would become a leading city in the new South.

Columbia at that time claimed a place alongside business and finance, alongside politics and public discourse, alongside education and the arts, with a distinctive role in relationship to the Church.

That's still our aspiration. We're building again. Though our work of discipleship and nurturing leaders is not dependent on buildings, the building that we are doing is important in reaching out to those whom God is calling to the Church. Our new residence hall with its environmentally friendly and community enhancing footprint has already given us a sense of what it means to move ahead. And our new leadership center, when it is built, will become a lasting symbol and constant reinforcement of our commitment to leaders and to the church.

We are not standing still these days. We're not waiting for the Vision Task Force to do its work, though we anticipate that they will greatly help us. Already ...

- We are broadening access to our teaching resources through evening and weekend courses—and the addition of our 7th degree program, the MAPT, with its four concentrations in worship, Christian leadership, Christian education, and pastoral counseling.
- We are embarking on a review of our entire M.Div. curriculum—asking ourselves again how we can best prepare leaders for the Church that serves God's purposes.
- We are recommitting ourselves to the value of diversity and the continuing journey for what it means to understand and be supportive of God's whole Church—people of every tribe, and tongue, and nation.

While we squarely stand on the shoulders of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and on the Reformed tradition, we remember that our call is NOT to sustain the institutional church of another era, but rather to prepare the Church in all its breadth to be the bride of Christ in a changing world.

My role is but a tiny part of what I believe to be both an awesome and joyful calling for all of us in the years ahead. Each of us here will have to determine how we will respond to God's call. We say "yes" and we say "no" every day to the narrow way of Jesus being opened before us. Today you are specifically asking me to say "yes"—and I pray that you will do the same.

For my part, among the many facets of my call are these:

1. I am called to **read God's compass** in this place. The world and the future are confusing, and therefore often frightening. In my lifetime I have not lived through a time of deeper or broader anxiety. The anxiety is in the Church, in the culture, and around the globe.

Navigating in this environment is like sailing in a dense fog at night. And any sailor will tell you that under those conditions our minds begin to make up realities. *Close your eyes*—and point to where you think north is at this moment. Keep pointing—and open your eyes. We're directionally challenged—but in the fog it's even worse, and virtually no one can sail in a straight line or maintain a sure heading. In those conditions, following a compass is the only way—and even then, many a sailor will swear that the compass is wrong.

My call is to do what I can to read the compass—to hold us on course in relation to the Living Word and the Written Word. That means prompting us as a community when we are tempted to forget the foundation of God's Sovereignty, the preeminence of Christ's love, the counsel of the

Spirit, the call to reconciliation, the stewardship of all creation, the glory of diversity, the freedom of servant-humility, and the like.

2. I am called to provoke hunger for Christ's Kingdom. My call is to encourage discontent with the status quo and a hunger for Christ's Kingdom in all of its fullness.

In our culture we seldom feel hunger. Instead, we so satiate ourselves in abundance that we don't take time to be truly nourished. We only feel hunger in those moments when our entertainment-buzz, or consumer-buzz, or addiction-buzz, or even self-centered spirituality-buzz wears off. And then, instead of listening to the deeper hungers, we often hasten for our next readily available fix. We may be malnourished, but we are still satiated—full, but never satisfied.

In the majority world, both physical and spiritual malnourishment is often easier to see. The first task of an aid worker with a malnourished child is not to give him or her food, but rather to provoke hunger. Children and adults who are nearly dead of malnourishment have little hunger. So the health worker puts just a little vitamin-enriched sugar water on a finger and sticks it in the person's mouth. The first sign of hope is when the child cries again.

It does little good to offer those in the church with great spiritual food, if there is no hunger for Christ and Christ's Kingdom. This is why the Scripture calls all of us to be "witnesses" to Christ's work—so that someone says, "I want some of THAT!" That's why our faith communities are to be such amazing places of God's grace and love, so that someone says, "I want some of THAT!" That's why the sacred journey of our lives with Christ are to be lived with authentic transparency, so that someone says, "I want some of THAT!" And a hunger is provoked.

My call among us, among other things, is to provoke hunger. It's the kind of evangelism that a shy person like me can do.

3. I am called to sing the Spirit's song. The Spirit always sings a song of community and it is the only way we will ever succeed. "One Church, One Hope, One Lord" is lived out together, utilizing our God-given diversity.

A good friend of mine was traveling in a Land Rover down a deeply rutted jungle road in Uganda, when he came upon a huge tree which had fallen squarely across the road. Nothing could pass, and the tree was far too big for him and his companions to move. Some of the people nearby, who heard the tree fall, arrived on the scene until there was quite a crowd—all talking about what should be done. One or two action-oriented souls began to hack away with axes at branches. Others tried to push. But the work was slow and the day was hot.

Then an old man who had been observing began to sing a rhythmic work song, and all present began to sing along. They put their shoulders to the tree and pushed in unison. And the tree began to move.

I am only one. I'm not a traditional scholar. I'm not much of an expert in anything. But God has called me to listen to the Spirit, and to the church, and to this community and to sing the Spirit's song.

So with an eye on the compass, with a hunger for Christ's Kingdom in my heart, and with a song on my lips, I commit this day to give all that I am able to preparing leaders for a church that is committed to following Jesus in God's work throughout the world. That is my joy! AMEN.

Steve Hayner gave this address on April 13, 2010, during his inauguration as Columbia's ninth president.