



**Columbia Theological Seminary
State of the Seminary
November 30, 2023
Rev. Dr. Victor Aloyo, Jr.
President**

Moved by The Spirit – Driven by Our Values

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
Isaiah 61:1

The Lord's anointed one brings good news to the humble, cares for the broken-hearted, proclamations of release to the captives, and comforts those who mourn. But that is not the end of the action; it is just the beginning. Then, the humble, broken-hearted former captives and mourners will rebuild, restore, and raise up. Indeed, those who were lowly will ascend to the positions of priests and ministers of the Most High. They will be ministers for the God who loves justice. The lowly will be recognized as God's own people who are adorned with the righteousness God inspires them to perform. This is the ministry that Jesus announces for himself, and challenges those who follow him to undertake.



Good morning, Seminary Community that includes our students, alums, faculty, staff, trustees, partners, and collaborators! We are here to celebrate the great calling in our lives as children of the Most High and as an educational institution of the Presbyterian Church created close to 200 years ago to serve Christ and the Church in preparing and equipping bold and innovative servant-leader-scholars! To serve as the 11th president of this esteemed institution is an honor and a joy!

In celebration of our 195-year history, of which almost 100 years have been here in Decatur, I join my colleagues of the President's Council to welcome the many faithful partners joining us via Zoom: pastors, friends from middle-governing judicatories, faculty colleagues from our sister institutions, family and dear friends. Your commitment to the ongoing mission of Columbia Seminary in cultivating faithful leaders for God's changing world is life-giving and deeply appreciated!

It is an honor to be with you today to deliver this State of the Seminary address that will focus on both the milestones and challenges we are actively engaged in and to share how we are writing a new narrative about Columbia Seminary's next chapter and its vital role in forming pastoral leaders for the church and the world. Amid the celebrations, we are not absolved of our responsibilities to our surrounding communities.

We are aware of the wars around the globe, the internal strife of communities at the margins, the injustices caused by oppressive systems that plague the very goodness of humanity, and the wilderness that many in our communities suffer, such as the ravages of loneliness, despair, lack of hope, mental challenges, lack of access to basic needs including safe and drinkable water, education, and social services.

Notwithstanding, our purpose and charge are based on God's Word, and, in particular, the text read in Isaiah 61 challenges us to understand that we are in the advent of something new. *Isaiah proclaims that the poor, the brokenhearted, the former captive and incarcerated, and mourners will "repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (verse 4). The author of Luke saw Isaiah's vision for the spirit-filled servant in Isaiah 61 as fulfilled through Jesus (Luke 4:16- 21). For this reason, pieces of this text are read in the synagogue before Jesus preaches his first hometown sermon. The Spirit of the Lord empowers Jesus to live out a particular mission: bringing Good News to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to prisoners (what is the distinction between the two?); and providing all that is necessary for those who mourn to be strengthened in spirit.*¹

¹ Commentary on Isaiah 61:1-11 by Casey Thornburgh Sigmon
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/spirit-of-the-lord-upon-me-2/commentary-on-isaiah-611-11-3>



But proclamation is not the end. There is a purpose to the Spirit's restoring work of particular souls. The arc of Luke-Acts reinforces this aim of Isaiah 61 over time. The Word of God acts in the world. The Spirit of God begins to repair society from the inside out. This is what the Spirit of God does - the God in whom we serve, study, and discern our calling and vocations never abandons us nor God's creation. Therefore, I stand before you today in awe of God's working and transformation in our lives as we reflect who we are within, taking into account our emotional, mental, intellectual, and spiritual capacities, and in Abundance & Grace, I celebrate you! You may ask why we should celebrate!

Friends, allow me to share some of this evolving story that I have been able to experience. There is a continuous movement happening at Columbia Seminary! Movements in history are based on context and the character of individuals boldly meeting the challenges of the ebbs and flows of life – and I wish to testify to personally and corporately my observations that are not all-consuming but evolving, I believe to a kaleidoscope of rich and vibrant colors of life experiences and theological inquiry.



First, I wish to share my growing love for Columbia's students, faculty, staff, alums, administrative faculty, and members of the trustees. This love is not the sentimental emotion experienced one day and gone the other because there was no substance or roots grounded in meeting life's challenges together. Quite the contrary, this love that is stirring up in my bones, heart, and mind is convinced by the depth and breadth of valiant servant leaders who, together with me, are meeting the surprising realities of the paradoxes in daily living and faith formation.

When I first came to campus just a little over 17 months, 29 days, 10 hours, 32 minutes, and 15 seconds, I wanted to ensure I had ample opportunities to meet at the President's Residence with students, faculty, trustees, alums, and staff to gather their ideas, thoughts, and observations about this special place. I understood some of the complexities on campus but wanted to hear the stories that abound in this beloved institution. I heard stories of resilience and frustrations from students, theological innovation and challenges from faculty, creative insights, and disappointments from administrators, ministry engagements characterized by uncertainties confronted by our alums, and authentic commitment from Seminary partners. These stories were critical to hear as I began my ministry with you. After many



conversations and group listening sessions, I can say that you were not shy about sharing your thoughts and perspectives!

There was a common thread in what I heard. In addition to your own life experiences of loss, our students, alums, faculty, and staff were all surrounded by stories in the church and society of congregations closing their doors, long-standing companies folding, theological institutions claiming financial distress, and bankruptcy, communities riddled by hate crimes, gun violence, the loss of children in elementary, middle schools, high schools, colleges & universities across the country, ministers resigning from their posts or disavowing their ordination vows, mental health conditions impacting the stability to dream dreams and envision possibilities. There was a deep sense of immense loss that, in turn, exacerbated hopelessness, mistrust, cynicism, and anger. There was and continues to exist a need for intentional. Grieving and lament fortify our individual and corporate coping mechanisms. There was this sense of urgency whereby we ought to try to “fix” something or the “somethings because of the element of fear that seemed to dominate well-intended courses of action.

And yet, I also witnessed and continue to marvel at our students' diligence and perseverance, pivoting and experimenting with



synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning platforms. I am inspired by our students who have come to this institution and are deeply committed to responding to their call to ministry. We have students who are bi-vocational in their studies, raising families, and juggling it all so they can study and grow into the leaders of ministry God calls them to be. In addition, our international students have traveled thousands of miles to be here and enrich the very fabric of our institutional life. Not only are they doing their best to adhere to the richness of the knowledge they receive in the lecture halls, but our students are also involved in every component of Seminary life. They are enhancing our scope of awareness through their insights and recommendations.

Amid these challenges, I witnessed our esteemed faculty's creativity and hard work in learning a new format for presenting the subject matter during a pandemic and its aftermath. Our faculty continues steadfastly to write, publish, teach, and preach at the seminary, in churches, and beyond. They submit grant proposals to philanthropic organizations based on their creativity. By God's grace, we have experienced successful proposals such as our Wonders of Worship initiative spearheaded by Dr. Kathy Dawson, The Columbia Preachers Studio for Renewal directed and led by Drs. Jake Myers and Anna Carter Florence renewed grants with our Center for Lifelong Learning and extended



partnerships with our Library and Archival Collections. Our matchless faculty of excellence has made our students and their education their priority! Their creativity, depth of scholarship, care of the students' well-being and flourishing, and the provision of integrity in all they do inspire and set the standard of pedagogical excellence at Columbia and across the theological academy. Columbia Seminary is claiming the intentional efforts to seek resources so that our faculty can continue exploring new vistas of theological frameworks or creating our own. We experienced a major conference in the spring spearheaded by Dr. Mark Douglas. The Just Creation Conference experienced a number of wider community supports consistent with our mission for environmental justice.

In addition, allow me to share some examples of the dynamic courses our faculty teach. In the "B" area, Bill Brown is teaching a course this semester entitled: *"The Aesthetic Word: Discovering Beauty and Creativity in the Old Testament,"* which explores the artistic power of Scripture to inspire the imagination and creativity of its readers in the context of ministry. In the "H" area, we are very excited about the arrival of Dr. Nicole Symmonds as Assistant Professor of Ethics. This semester, she is teaching: "Black Embodied Culture, Theology, and Ethics" about Black history and culture from a theological perspective.



She will continue to bring such a welcome energy and perspective to our faculty for years to come.

In the “P” area, we have created an Intercultural Chaplaincy certification program through the leadership of Drs. Chanequa Walker Barnes and Mindy McGarrah Sharp.

We celebrated the work and retirement of Dr. Marcia Riggs in August. We will be preparing with gratitude for the retirement of Dr. Haruko Nawata Ward at the end of the calendar year. We are celebrating the Great Cloud of Witnesses in our midst by not only repositioning the portraits in the Refectory in two specific areas in The Richards Center, but we will use technology so that the contributions of these faithful servant-scholars will be easily accessible with proper information for students, visitors, and researchers alike.

We are also grateful for the presence of Rosy Kandathil, our post-doctorate Louisville Institute intern, who is teaching a new course on humor in the Hebrew Bible, which explores how humor intersects with our students’ pastoral development and formation.



In addition, among many accomplishments in a season of multiple transitions, our Academic Affairs Department, with the able, inspiring, and efficient leadership of Dean Christine R. Yoder, witnessed the result of two years of collaborative work across the Seminary and the excellent leadership of Drs. Ann Clay Adams and Martha Moore-Keish, where the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) reaffirmed the Seminary's accreditation for 10 years. Both reviews went exceptionally well. Through a successful search process, Columbia called its newest professor, Dr. Nicole Symmonds, as Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics. The Academic Affairs Office welcomed with gratitude and excitement its first Associate Dean for Academic Programs, Dr. Jenn Carlier, and Rev. Rhonda Murdock Johnson as Administrative Assistant.

Our forward-looking trajectory as an institution cannot take shape without the voices and participation of our community. I am learning about our strengths, challenges, and opportunities and challenging us to understand them not through scarcity and fear but in abundance & grace! Three task forces composed of an intersection of faculty, trustees, students, and staff worked on the framework for an official Remote Work Policy, food insecurity on



campus, navigating health insurance for students, accessibility for the physically disabled, and greater support for our international students. Their reports submitted to the President's Council and subsequent conversations with the executive leadership brought about a renewed sense of belonging as we reclaim the art of dialogue, even when examining policies and practices. The Strategic Blueprint includes the recommendations, indicating our collective commitment to move on them incrementally. The Refectory was opened this spring for community building as students can have lunch without cost, and faculty and administrators can join – with a slight cost.

Our objective is not to develop platforms that will prompt resolution to life's circumstances but to acknowledge that our role is to evolve and use wisely the abundance of talents and gifts that only by God's grace can we employ for the betterment of society in and through the Church, with a capital "C."

In my conversations with church leaders either in-person or at worship services at congregations all along the Southeastern region and abroad, I understand that the world and the Church have not fully experienced the depth and consequences of the socio-economic-religious-political ravages of the last few years. These issues continue unraveling as we



speak; therefore, I contend that we are living and will continue to live “between the times.” Communities are shifting demographically, educational systems are being challenged by laws determining which books to read, culture and ethnic identities are being called into question, political and religious leaders are giving venomous rhetoric agency, and access to drugs is becoming more prevalent than a person achieving an education. To be faithful in our quest to prepare leaders to be faithful in this generation, we need to embark on a journey of unrelenting exploration, of unsettled certainties, recognizing that God continues to work in the world, often in mysterious ways. And because most of our churches and many of our models for theological education were framed in a different era, we will often feel disoriented--unable to understand or acknowledge, much less respond to, what is happening.

Friends, because we believe that God continues to work in the world, an essential task of theological education is to prepare leaders to pay attention to what God is doing and to participate in that work. God has summoned us to devote our energies to a mission and vision we cannot fulfill alone. Informed by the wisdom of the seminary community and in response to the changing context of ministry, we have developed a Strategic Blueprint that offers goals and priorities through 2027, when we will commemorate the 100th year in



Decatur and the following year, usher in our third century as an educational institution of the PCUSA.

In this endemic era of vast demographic shifts, continuous environmental changes, rapid technological innovation, and global economic uncertainty, we embrace Columbia's Reformed identity, Presbyterian heritage, and commitment to knowledge for personal, community, ecumenical enhancement, and vocational progress.

Notwithstanding, in these uncertain times, we are grateful for your commitment and dedication to our mission of cultivating faithful leaders for God's changing world as we seek to develop and implement creative platforms to unfold four main priorities: access, flourishing, and sustainability of our students, faculty, and staff; Intercultural Intelligence across all levels of the institution, Mental Health and Wellness for every constituent, and Partnership-Building with the local church, judicatories, and mission-adjacent entities.

How are we moving forward: through the development of the inaugural Student Formation and Campus Culture department led by the visionary leadership of Dr. Kathryn Threadgill, one of the biggest highlights is the relationship building and trust that is happening with the newly formed



SFCC Staff Team and the CTS Community. It took many months within the last year to search for the right people God was calling to this CTS Community. Many faculty, students, and staff gave their time in the interview process, which yielded much fruit. Fay Bond, Dean Natasha Patterson, Rev. Lindsay Geist, and Dr. Ria Martin – are faithfully implementing initiatives with all students and developing creative patterns of collaboration with all Seminary constituents. For instance, their service with and among International Students through varying supportive resources is inspiring. For instance, SFCC is leading and guiding the Seminary in a new **PC(USA) Partnership Pilot**. This PC(USA) Partnership Pilot is designed to form authentically, mutually beneficial relationships with the Church and our CTS Students. It is a call to a relationship now, not just in a students' final year, where everything from internships to job opportunities is explored and harvested together.

In addition, with the collaboration of Seminary partners, there is intentionality towards **Mental Health and Well-being**. SFCC has implemented *Wellness Wednesdays* each month and has seen students able to focus on their mental health and well-being in various ways. We have established a new way of communicating prayer concerns through *Campus Compass*. We introduced mental health into the very fabric of



New Student Orientation and have seen much pastoral care generated from that conversation. We are focused on the holistic well-being of each member of the CTS Community, and thus, we are offering Staff/Faculty Yoga later this month. As we continue to hear the voices of this community and offer opportunities for mental health and well-being to all, we encourage people to reach out to Rev. Lindsay if they have ideas or suggestions.

Our new inaugural department of Enrollment Management and Vocational Outreach, through the exciting and vivacious leadership of the Rev. Ann-Henley Nicholson, within the last year, has made significant changes to our admissions process, incorporating faculty feedback within our application and application review process, automating our degree reclassification process and clarifying degree reclassification requirements; preparing and vetting a comprehensive scholarship proposal for AY 24-25; changing our admissions deadlines to align with our academic year, external scholarship deadlines, and the admissions deadlines of our peer institutions; and more, resulting in our admitting 13% more PC(USA) students than the previous year and admitting 40% fewer students than in recent years yet still enrolling the same number of first level masters students as the previous year.



Additionally, we restructured our team to better align with individual strengths and the team's needs while promoting sustainability and flourishing. As a result, Rev. Matt Rich began serving as our Director of Admissions and Enrollment Operations, coupling his pastoral ministry with prospective students with his technical expertise in our enrollment management platform. He also now serves as our Primary Designated School Official (PDSO), working closely with our incoming international students alongside other Designated School Officials (DSOs) as they seek VISAs in order to study here. Additionally, Rev. Bobby Lee Graham began serving as our Associate Director of Vocational Outreach in August, traveling across the country spreading the good news about what God is doing in our midst. Additionally, he supervises our part-time Connectors, who also travel far and wide to share our story as they shepherd prospective students through their discernment. Amy Hayes also serves as our Administrative Assistant, supporting our team by providing administrative support and supporting our prospective students by answering the main admissions line, responding to emails in our admissions inbox, and shepherding them throughout their application process. Ms. Carlene Knights continues to serve faithfully as our Director of Student Financial Services, as does Ms. Sarah Kate Bumgarner, who serves as one of our Connectors. We



are currently searching for another Connector, and we welcome your suggestions and prayers.

Our Advancement Department, led by the wise and innovative leadership of David Huffine, is actively supporting the President with an initiative of “Friendraising”, a meaningful connection with Columbia’s external constituents, churches, alumni, and old and new friends. This initiative builds relationships, sparks partnerships, enables telling the story of Columbia –today and tomorrow—and fosters listening to their needs, hopes, and dreams and how Columbia can walk alongside them. Since arrival, Dr. Aloyo has preached, spoken, taught, and visited over 80 engagements in over 15 U.S. states or territories. Advancement has been working to prepare Columbia for a major comprehensive capital campaign to engage with friends and donors and build interest and investments that will equip Columbia for its Third Century of mission and service. The year ahead will be a crucible to completing our readiness to launch and succeed in such an effort that Columbia has not undertaken for more than 15 years.

Our Business & Finance Department, led by the incomparable wizard of formulas and all things tax-related, Marty Sadler, is co-leading our Shepherding Committee to develop our Campus Master Plan. This is a



natural progression from our Strategic Blueprint, where we examine the transformation of our campus that will efficiently operationalize the space for the teaching-learning-campus culture enterprise. With guidance from the Business & Finance and Investment Committees of the Board of Trustees, Marty has provided efficient fiduciary leadership through twenty-five years of market volatility, a global pandemic, socio-religious pandemics, and many internal circumstances, giving us the opportunity to be still standing and developing platforms to equip saints for ministry. I take this moment to appreciate Marty for his tireless efforts and commitment to the Seminary mission. I invite you to please show our gratitude as he will be retiring at the end of February 2024.

We are proceeding intentionally and actively in mapping our Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion efforts through the strategic guidance of the Rev. Maureen Gerald. She has been meeting with staff, students, faculty, and stakeholders to examine the depth of the hurt and suffering caused by institutional and personal biases that impact campus culture. She is also guiding us in recalibrating the Ombuds Initiative and will, in the next semester, present a road map proposal for our consideration. Riggs.



One of our many treasures is our John Bulow Campbell Library, the C. Benton Kline Jr Special Collection and Archives, and the Center for Academic Literacy. Through the efficient organizational skills of Dr. Kelley Campbell and our fellow teammates, they examine and research resources to ensure they are accessible to faculty, students, and Seminary partners. This team of dedicated partners efficiently provides services that are invaluable. Several partnerships are being explored to enhance our capacity for further access, and more information will be forthcoming.

We firmly believe that ministry is an ongoing learning, serving, and innovating process! Our Center for Lifelong Learning is a beacon of support of creative learning opportunities for servant-leader-scholars during and after graduation. Grateful for the wise leadership of Dr. Israel Gallindo, we have seen this component of the Seminary as integral to our mission, and we welcome Dr. Helen Blier, who is serving as our new Director of the Center for Lifelong Learning.

We are refining and amplifying the Seminary's contextual education and international partnership efforts through the impassioned leadership of Dr. Sue Kim Park and the team of the Revs. Alvin Lingenfelter and Sungwoo Sam Kim. I am grateful for the intentional outreach being



made to Korean, Korean American, Pacific Islander, Latin American and African American, and Africana Diaspora communities in the Atlanta area and forging partnerships with global partners. In March, I will travel with Sue Kim Park and other Seminary colleagues to S. Korea, Taiwan, and Japan to further develop equitable and reciprocal global partnerships.

Friends, rebuilding our infrastructure to implement our mission, vision, and strategic directives is complex, time-consuming, and critical. Your active participation by providing insights and creative recommendations are welcomed. I hope you are as excited as I am about the future of Columbia. Let's fan the flames of our love for Christ, the Church, and this beloved institution. Today, I invite you to be part of the Seminary's critical mission of inspiring and challenging every student to a life of leadership and purpose for the glory of God. I invite you to collaborate on this new thing God is doing at Columbia as we are emboldened to write and live into a dynamic and risk-taking narrative, moved by the Spirit and driven by our values.