To: The Bishops of The Episcopal Church


Dear Brother and Sister Bishops,

As bishops serving on the Board of Trustees at the General Theological Seminary of The Episcopal Church, we have witnessed up close an unprecedented year of challenge, conflict and opportunity. We write to you today in order to share our thoughts, continue our honest conversation, and ask for your constant prayer and support as we embrace our continuing mission: forming and educating leaders for the church in our changing world.

There is no way to understand the events of last fall and spring without placing them in the wider context of theological education in America and the state of The Episcopal Church. The ground has shifted fundamentally, and many of the givens in the worlds of academia and church are now adrift. How much seminary debt is too much? Should students make a three-year residential commitment? Can distance learning form effective leaders? What is the right balance of classroom and field experience? What is the ideal faculty composition? And how can we carefully transform a beloved institution with the clock ticking loudly in the background?

The committee of students, faculty and board members who selected The Very Rev. Kurt Dunkle as General Seminary’s 13th Dean and President chose a leader to guide us through these rocky shoals. We knew it would be hard and even painful work to turn a ship of our age and reputation, a lesson many of you have learned in your congregations and dioceses. You also know that the ghosts of an institution’s life are always lurking and that certain patterns, narratives and resistance tend to resurface in moments of transition and change, as clearly happened here.

The good news is that – with the ongoing facilitation of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center and the voluntary participation of all segments of the seminary community – we have had more honest conversations about our past, present and future in the past few months than most of us have seen in our entire association with the school, and have made much progress toward reconciliation.

The hard news is that this truth and reconciliation process came only after deep wounds were inflicted on and by all sides. But in the end, we believe that our Seminary will be stronger for this experience – more transparent, and more united in our efforts to maintain all the best of the past as we continue to evolve to meet the needs and address the challenges of a changed world with purpose and vision.

We have all learned a great deal about mutuality, deep listening, repentance and servant leadership. So we ask God’s grace as we seek to become a more true witness to the virtues carved into the stones of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd.

All of which brings us to this moment and this letter. We write not only to ask your prayers or to provide explanation, though both are essential. We write to welcome you to commit with us to a journey. Your input and your support of GTS -- the first seminary of The Episcopal Church -- will be vital to our efforts to test new approaches and create new models for seminary education.

As efforts continue, we are gratified and encouraged by clear signs of progress:

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- Dozens of applications were submitted for fall 2015, and we anticipate welcoming a full complement of students in September whose intelligence, experience, maturity and eagerness will contribute to the remaking of a seminary.

- The Association of Theological Schools conducted a rigorous evaluation of General Seminary this winter and issued a positive assessment and accreditation, with strong encouragement for several initiatives and helpful suggestions for our future development.

- The Wisdom Year pilot project launched last fall, and most of the rising senior class will partake starting this fall. Serving in sites across the region but still living on campus, these residents will spend their final year of seminary in ministry less like traditional field education and more akin to a curacy with ample supervision and reflection ... and all coupled with compensation adequate to pay for the year’s tuition and basic housing.

- The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center’s work from October to May has provided the entire school with tools and practices to examine our common life and rebuild trust. We plan to use these practices and others to form a culture that is more faithful, open, honest and healthy. The LMPC will continue that journey with us next year.

- We will miss the presence of some seasoned faculty who have served the seminary faithfully for years, but one of the graces of our location and reputation is that many well-respected academic and church professionals are excited to join in teaching and formation at General Seminary this fall and beyond.

- We have turned our gaze outward and are exploring partnerships and alignments with other seminaries and church organizations. For instance, a new partnership with the United Thank Offering will bring returning young missionaries to General Theological Seminary to live and work, bridging the wisdom of global mission and local engagement.

The Episcopal Church is not the same church it was 100, 50 or even 10 years ago. Life has changed; our contexts for mission and ministry have changed. Systems must be more agile, adaptive and lean. These are not buzzwords; they are signs of a fundamental paradigm shift. As Episcopalians, we carry catholic, time-honored traditions into relationship with these changing environments, and we ask our seminaries to prepare leaders who are capable of engaging this dance between ancient and future.

We are convinced that General Theological Seminary has a special witness to make in our church and in the world. Can historic, catholic traditions come to new life in a wired, multicultural, spiritual-but-not-religious age? Yes they can. As General turns toward resurrection, we hope to share the good news and inspire others in our church to risk, listen and be transformed for the sake of the gospel, along with us.

We ask you to join us and send your students to train as Christian leaders in a school uniquely dedicated to transformation and excellence. Please feel free to contact any of us to discuss this letter and our hopes for the future of General Theological Seminary and our Church.

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