**A Statement of the Faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary**

The faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary is grateful for the invitation “to give witness to our convictions” extended by our sibling school, Columbia Theological Seminary.

Located in the heart of Texas, we serve a community comprised of students, staff, and faculty who come from a variety of backgrounds and hold a broad range of commitments. As is true of our church at large, our challenge and joy is to open our arms wide to the increasing diversity that marks our cultural context while at the same time honoring our common identity.

*Our Witness to Christian Love: A Call to Mutual Forbearance*

We agree with our colleagues at Columbia Seminary that schism is “a profound theological and pastoral problem.” We believe, especially in these troubled times, that it is crucial to maintain faithful relationships with one another as members of the body of Christ. Along these lines, the biblical witness charges us

To lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2).

To “bear with one another,” it seems, is to be patient with each other even as God is patient with us. To put up with each other, waiting for consensus and for “yet more light to break forth.” To find ways to live together. To study Scripture, pray, and argue fairly with one another. Never to give up on our hope for unity and peace, believing the Spirit is present and working in our midst.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has a long history of encouraging forbearance as essential to our life together. The *Book of Order* explains, for example, “there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good character and principles may differ.” Because this is the case, it is “the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (F-3.0105).

Where there is forbearance, there is a table set around which we can pray, study, listen, share, debate, and mutually form one another, subjecting ourselves to the work of the Spirit as we pass the common loaf.

*Mutual Forbearance and the 221st General Assembly*

Our hope is that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, might show forbearance toward one another in the conversations and debates that take place surrounding the June 2014 meeting of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s 221st General Assembly.

A great many controversial questions will be raised at this Assembly. It will be tempting to retreat into camps of the like-minded and to disparage our opponents. It might seem easy for those of us who disagree with the Assembly’s actions to seek dismissal from the church’s fellowship in order to find a more sympathetic communion. Again, we urge our brothers and sisters not to act in haste.

The issues we are facing are complex. We believe a premature resolution will serve no one well. We know and love many people in our seminary’s constituency who deeply disagree and yet sit on the same pews with each other week after week. Perhaps the one thing worse than those in disagreement sitting on the same pew is those in disagreement NOT sitting on the same pew. As Ephesians teaches, unity in the Spirit means living lovingly, peacefully, gently, and humbly with one another. The “life worthy of the life to which we have been called” looks like worshipping next to those with whom we in some matters disagree.

We suggest that “mutual forbearance” means endeavoring to hear and take seriously the convictions of others even while we hold our own (sometimes differing) convictions at full strength. To exercise “mutual forbearance” does not mean being timid about that to which we are committed, but it does mean being circumspect about how we present, share, implement, and protect our commitments. We think that “bearing with one another in love” should discourage us both from pressing too quickly for changes not widely supported across the church and from opting too readily for actions that would further the schism already taking place in our fellowship. Rather, let us be drawn together to the table to which we are all invited by our Lord—to pray and converse, to listen and argue, to reflect and grow into what we are becoming as an historic communion in a new day.

Some may register the important concern that a call to forbearance can function to delay justice, and that justice delayed is justice denied. To deny justice is in no way our intent or our desire; we are, after all, called by God to “do justice” in the world (Micah 6:8).  Along with promoting justice, however, we believe we are also called to “love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” Kindness toward others and humility of perspective before the mysteries of God are, we believe, pathways to preserving the unity of the church.  As Paul reminded the Christians of Corinth - themselves caught in a potentially schismatic fight over the behavior of believers - we are *together* the body of Christ, and individually members of it. “The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor the head to the feet, I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:21). We need to hold onto each other as we together discover what the Spirit holds in store for the church.

*Mutual Forbearance and a Hopeful Church*

The Church is the body of Christ. The *Book of Order* describes what this means for us, in part:

“The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation” (F-1.0301).

We are committed to building a church that is a community of hope. We are committed to living lives that are worthy of our calling—lives that manifest humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity, and peace. Our hope is that, in us, the world may see the vision of God’s intent and be drawn toward God’s promised future.

We live in the hope that we can, as the Scripture teaches, “maintain the unity of Spirit in the bond of peace,” exercising forbearance toward one another as together we engage in the hard work of discerning the shape of God’s steadfast Word for these new days. This is the work we love, and it is the work to which we are called as faculty members at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

*May 8, 2014*