**Announcement about Fall instruction**

June 23, 2020

The end of the 2019-20 academic year was unlike any other in the past hundred years of the Seminary’s history. Despite the enormous difficulties caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, I am proud of the ways that the Seminary faculty and students were able to salvage the semester. When the Seminary cancelled classes on March 13, we had no idea that the rest of the semester would need to be on-line. But within a week, the Seminary’s faculty quickly and creatively adapted to distance learning and on-line teaching resources. These learning technologies and the strong commitment of the Seminary’s faculty and students allowed us to maintain our focus on outstanding theological education and the importance of a community of learners.

In these uncertain times, all of us have wondered about the 2020-21 academic year: how it will be different than in years past, how we might foster theological learning in community while adhering to prudent standards of public health during a global pandemic. Last week, the faculty held a specially-called meeting to discuss potential scenarios for the fall. In the wake of that meeting, I am pleased to announce the Seminary’s intentions for the fall semester. That plan, in outline, looks like this:

1. All larger courses (15 students or larger) will be conducted on-line for the duration of the fall semester.
2. Instructors of smaller courses (14 students or fewer) will have the option of hosting regular or occasional face-to-face sessions during the regularly scheduled hours of these courses. These sessions are wholly at the discretion of the instructor. If a faculty member chooses to exercise this option, all appropriate guidelines for public health will be followed. Those include the following:
3. only the three largest classrooms in McMillan or outdoor spaces on Seminary grounds may be used for instruction to ensure at least 6 feet of social distancing between students;
4. masks will be required for all participants;
5. regular disinfecting of these classrooms will be required.
6. If a faculty member chooses to exercise the face-to-face option outlined above, s/he will also need to provide an analogous on-line option for those students who choose not to participate in face-to-face learning. This means that students can opt for a fully on-line fall semester, if they wish. In the coming weeks I will be working with Learning Technologies Librarian Mandy Deen and Senior Director of Information Technology Julie Newton to explore possibilities for faculty to combine remote and face-to-face learning for their courses.
7. The exact nature of the MAYM intensives is yet to be determined. We are currently examining the possibility of blended learning scenarios that preserve elements of cohort building that are essential to that degree program. I anticipate making a more specific announcement about the shape of the MAYM fall semester within a month.

I believe this plan honors the varied levels of comfort that each of us has with distance and face-to-face instruction during these unprecedented times. It requires larger classes to be conducted on-line, while giving faculty members and students choice about how they want to participate in smaller classes. And I believe that this plan is prudent given the current status of COVID-19 in Austin. The Seminary administration will continue to monitor the data surrounding the coronavirus in the months ahead. We will be guided by public health recommendations from the City of Austin and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If that situation worsens, we may have to rescind the face-to-face option outlined above or more strictly limit the numbers of students who can gather in a classroom. Whatever the shape of the semester ahead, we can trust that theological education at Austin Seminary will continue in service to the church and the world.

For those of you who will be beginning your first semester in any of our degree programs, I want to encourage you to come to Austin and embed yourself on our campus. Our residential apartments are open and we are planning appropriate, socially distanced forms of welcome and interaction with faculty, staff, and your fellow students. Austin remains one of the most dynamic cities in the nation and Austin Seminary continues to be one of the most exciting places in the country to pursue a theological education. I look forward to beginning the academic year with each of you.

In Christ,

Dave Jensen, Academic Dean and Professor in the Clarence N. and Betty B. Frierson Distinguished Chair of Reformed Theology