

December 29, 2016

Dear friends,

I am sitting down to write this New Year's letter to you after coming from our last chapel service of the semester. It is the second week of Advent, and the chapel is resplendent in soft candlelight that warmly illumines our annual service of Liturgy of Lessons and Carols. Even though we have many powerhouse services in Oxnam Chapel during the semester, the gentle rhythm of spoken word and song reminding us of the coming light has become my favorite. This year's service was unexpectedly poignant for me.

In many respects the service was like many other Advent services: a collection of scripture passages, beautiful songs and anthems, and periods of silence and prayer. But this year, my attention was not focused primarily on *what* we did but *who* was doing it. With new-found clarity and meaning, I looked around at the incredible diversity that constitutes this amazing community. Scriptures were read in Hebrew, Spanish, and French. Men and women of every hue and many ethnicities sang with unified heart. Fresh-faced and wrinkled, new and familiar, conservative and liberal, Democrat and Republican and disaffected – all coming together on sacred ground to look beyond themselves, beyond ideology, beyond theology, to the One God of majesty and glory who deigns to be enfleshed and to suffer with us... and as us.

One of the great privileges and joys to which I am regularly treated is to see our students grow and mature in faith and service. Whether they come to Wesley straight out of college or seasoned with career experience, students come into the seminary ... well... how shall I say it... *green*. Most of them are either unsure or entirely *too* sure of their faith. Most have very little idea of the enormity of the vocation they have chosen. But over the years of intense formation - guided by our committed and compassionate faculty – a miracle happens. In fact, hundreds of miracles happen. Our students grow in the knowledge and love of God, and they develop much greater capacity to serve and to lead in God's mission.

This past year students of every gender, race, orientation, and belief read together, prayed together, sang together, learned together, and grew together toward a more perfect union. Our alumni and alumnae – blossoming in their ministry – continued serving congregations, organized communities for mission, advocated for the marginalized, and stepped up and out in righteous protest. They took their prayer to the streets! They embraced strangers with compassion, changing the church for the better and brought Light into the darkened places.

In 2016, Wesley continued to evolve and respond to the needs of the world. Allow me to share a few highlights from the past year and a few things to look forward to in 2017:

- **The Lilly Endowment has awarded Wesley a 5 year, \$1.5 million grant to become a hub for young adult outreach with local congregations.** This grant strengthens our young adult engagement, explores innovation and design theory in ministry, and supports local faith communities as they experiment with creative ways to engage young adults in the DC region. The Lilly Endowment also awarded a sustaining grant of \$250,000 to continue the Lewis Center for Church Leadership's Community Leadership Fellows program over the next six years.

- **Wesley's Doctor of Ministry program will offer three focused tracks in 2017.** One will be in *Public Engagement*, inspired by the work of the late Rev. Dr. Clementa Pinckney, who received his DMin posthumously at Wesley's 2016 Commencement ceremonies May 9. Also on the list of new offerings are *Life Together: Spirituality for Transforming Community*, and *Church Leadership Excellence*. **Wesley was also awarded a contract for a Doctor of Ministry program for Army chaplains enrolled in that service's clinical pastoral education course.** Five chaplains will be starting the program in January, A second offering, "*Military Chaplaincy: Religious Leadership in a Complex, Multi-Faith Environment*" starts in March. In total 45 military chaplains are enrolled in DMin tracks.
- **Eleven students in Wesley's "Religion and the American Presidency" course traveled to St. Louis, Mo., for the second presidential debate on Oct. 9.** The course is taught by Mike McCurry, Distinguished Professor of Public Theology at Wesley, and one of the co-chairs of the Commission on Presidential Debates. The presidential debate experience was a first for all participants and provided a experiential look at the intersections of faith and politics.
- **Wesley's Center of Public Theology** – The first class of students including a specialization in public theology in their degree program are on track to graduate in spring 2017. The Center also helped finalize a proposal for a **new non-degree "Certificate in Faith and Public Life,"** providing opportunities for theological education to students outside the core of traditional Wesley degree applicants.

This is Wesley. These are the Wesley students. These are the Wesley alumni and alumnae. Observing our students learn and grow over the past year and watching them expand their horizons of service has filled me with hope and pride. This past year has brought me pride in the good and successful work of the school; pride in a faculty who is wholly devoted; pride in a staff who keeps the entire project going; **and most of all, pride in our graduates who are becoming the holy change they seek to foster.** And all these things fill me with hope for an Epiphany that is sure to come.

I invite you in 2017 to participate more fully in the life of your school. No matter if you graduated last year or over 20 years ago, Wesley is still a community you can call home. A place where you can still participate and support the community practically and spiritually. Remember Wesley when you are speaking to those who are considering theological education. Share of your experience at your school. **It is a great gift when a graduate brings a prospective student to campus or encourages them to apply to Wesley* -** and a wonderful way to stay connected to your school. I encourage you to also **consider coming back to campus and taking a class.** **Last year Wesley started offering one free class per semester to alumni(ae) when taken for enrichment.** We continue to offer a discount rate for those who wish to take a course for continuing education. You can also **nominate a fellow classmate for the 2017 Society of John Wesley Award** which will be given at commencement this spring. Nominations are now open and can be made at:

<https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/Alumni/society-of-john-wesley-award-nomination-form/>

And please remember how much your school appreciates your financial support. **We so appreciate the gifts that you give** which allow us to continue to offer life-changing education and programming.

In closing, please know **how very thankful your school is for you** and your ministry and service,

Rev. Robert K. Martin, PhD
Dean and Professor of Christian Formation and Leadership, Wesley Theological Seminary

***Deadline of February 1st 2017 for merit scholarship consideration.**