



**Rev. Mary E. McNamara**  
**Inauguration Speech**  
**April 11, 2010**

Reverend Sartain, Chairperson Ryan, distinguished visitors, trustees, faculty and staff, colleagues, alumni and students, friends and family, thank you for coming to make this a great occasion for United Theological Seminary and for me. We are grateful for your presence here today.

As I begin let me take a moment to introduce, and ask to stand and be recognized, members of my family. First, my two sons, Peter and Nathaniel, who have traveled from New York and California and whom I dearly love. Second, my wonderful brother Paul, his wife Christine, and their son Eric.

I especially want to thank Dan Aleshire and Joe Hough for honoring us by being here. Dan Aleshire is the executive director of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, clearly one of the people anywhere most knowledgeable about theological education. Joe Hough served as president of Union Theological Seminary in New York for a decade; it was my privilege to work with him and report to him. He, too, has an extraordinary knowledge of theological education, is courageous, and, like Dan Aleshire, has a pastor's heart.

I wish that there were time to recognize every one of the distinguished leaders here today, but because the honor of having the president of the National Council of Churches in ministry locally only comes to a city once in a great while, I'd like to recognize Peg Chamberlin. In a way that I am sure is characteristic of her, she welcomed me to her office when I first arrived and in that very first hour engaged in a conversation that let me know the council and United could readily work in partnership.

I want to express my personal gratitude to Sharon Ryan and the other members of the Board of Trustees who have been so very helpful to me in the months since I arrived. I have learned that we can rely on their wisdom and experience.

We wish to thank all of you who are here representing institutions of the church and of higher education. We are delighted to welcome Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel. We are privileged to know you as friends and colleagues. I wish to thank all of you who are leading this celebratory service. Each of you was invited to participate because of your special gifts and because of the commitment you have made to United. Please applaud these worthy people.

We planned this celebration to occur during the Easter season, symbolizing renewal and new life. On this day we celebrate the wondrous ability of God to guide us to our future. Here we commit ourselves to discern that future faithfully and fully. Here we pledge ourselves to honesty, compassion, and courage. We will honor all that has been achieved

and courageously and faithfully address the needs of a changing, pain-filled, yet hopeful, world.

### **Context**

Our seminary is not yet 50 years old. It opened in September 1962 with 50 students and 10 faculty members, the first ecumenical seminary in mainline Protestantism in the current era. Formed from the merger of the School of Theology of Yankton College at Yankton, South Dakota, and Mission House Theological Seminary of Plymouth, Wisconsin, its founders celebrated the legacy of both schools and were persuaded “that the church needed to reflect theologically on its primary purpose and mission as well as on the issues that were foremost in society.” (Merrill, p. 7) That is our legacy.

Now we look toward the second half-century of the life of this seminary, with a beautiful campus and award-winning chapel; fine faculty and staff; a talented and visionary board of trustees; and many emerging opportunities. We do so in the light of Easter hope, buoyed by the arrival of spring and confident that United is ready to respond to the real needs of people, the church, and the times -- and to do so with gusto. We will continue to provide excellent preparation for the ministries of clergy and laity, for all those wonderful people who come to us wanting to change the world.

### **Gospel**

Today’s Gospel is traditionally read soon after Easter. The terrible events leading up to Good Friday are past and even the miraculous experience of the empty tomb and the first appearances of the risen Lord are now a memory. For Jesus’ followers recent days have been quiet. Here we find disciples who had been fishermen returning to what they knew how to do best. As for many of us, the routine of familiar work can be comforting in disturbing times. Already bewildered, catching no fish left them discouraged and confused. They knew how to do this, but it wasn’t working. They were deeply perplexed. Suddenly Jesus appeared on the shore and asked how things were going. Like a trustworthy and experienced friend, he suggested tossing the net out on the other side. They did and suddenly their nets were filled to bursting. We wonder whether it was a miracle, common sense, or good luck, or all three. Whatever it was, it worked and they were astonished.

Many of us identify with the disciples’ frustration and fatigue. Our best efforts yield little or nothing. We cannot see our way to making the future different and are not sure that we are meant to be part of a different future. As Jesus invited the disciples, so he invites us to try doing familiar things differently.

### **Decline of Seminaries and Church**

This lesson touches on a sore spot in theological education today, especially for mainline Protestant seminaries. We developed our skills at preparing clergy, community leaders, and scholars over many years of hard work. For decades, at the end of every academic year a new class walked proudly across the stage and into a wide variety of compelling,

creative futures. They were called into ministry and responded fully. United was part of those wonderful years. Our distinguished alumni leading this service reflect the exceptional preparation received here and their extraordinary giftedness.

We continue to attract fine students. But now we are in a time when recruiting new students must be nuanced with conversations about the health of the church. Nationally, United Church of Christ membership has declined by almost half since United was founded. A number of today's graduates, especially second career graduates, sustain themselves in a second job while serving small congregations. We sort among our applicants looking for the ability to provide entrepreneurial leadership and among our alumni for their mentors. All across the country seminary leaders scan a complex environment and are learning to think differently about the future.

We look for hopeful signs, for new kinds of ministry and new kinds of clerical and lay leadership. We look for new ways to bring people together and even for patterns of faithfulness that may be supported as much by virtual communities as geographical ones. We are fisher folk waiting for God to show us how to cast our nets on the side of the future, and we are beginning to learn.

Some of our most important learnings are the need to focus on:

**(1) The Impact of the Communications Revolution on Tomorrow's Pastors and Other Faith Leaders** – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that in the Jewish prayer book, commenting on a verse from Isaiah, the rabbis advised, “Call them not your children but your builders.” He asks, “How do you lay the groundwork for peace? By turning children into builders; people who will create and construct together.” P. 230 We would take this assertion and apply it to students. Our students are our builders. This is a time when seminaries need to take seriously their responsibility to be the laboratory of the future church, the future world, and to invite students – tomorrow's leaders – to be at the center of that effort.

They are our builders more than ever before. We are in the midst of a dramatic shift in communications equivalent in impact to the invention of the printing press and are startled by how much our world has already changed. This shift will require the seminary to keep pace with new opportunities made possible by information technology, the Internet, and social networking, and to respond to the growing demand to participate and innovate in all of these, including distance education.

This communication revolution is shaping young adults, including our young adult students, profoundly. They are the group that John Zogby calls “the First Globals.” They are under age 29, are “deeply familiar with cyberspace,” and see themselves as living in a “borderless world.” For them the American Century is over. “[T]he Whole Earth Century has begun.” In them the sense of global citizenship so many churches have encouraged for years is being solidified in a decade.

These new perspectives and powerful new means of communication challenge them and

us to discover what Christian faith means for tomorrow's world and what kind of church or even cyber-church community and leadership is needed. Some suggestions will seem zany or even mischievous, but the church itself is in a time of watching closely to see where the Spirit is moving.

The communication revolution is changing seminary education. While future students preparing for the ministry will need all the historic disciplines (Bible, history, theology, ethics, and arts of ministry), they will need more sociology, psychology, contemporary history, and even education in Internet-based communication. Many First Globals will seek courses and experiences beyond the historic M.Div. curriculum. A number will express their faith and use their theological education in unique, highly personal ways. Not only students are affected. More clergy are returning for continuing education to refresh their skills and update their knowledge. Lay leaders will look to us for fine education, both for use in their congregations and for their own quality of life.

**(2) We Will Need to More Intentionally Address International, Intercultural, Interfaith, and Interracial Concerns** – It is not only the young who are becoming more global; every neighborhood and household is becoming more global. As news travels instantaneously around the world, as local community issues take on international dimensions, as friends more often come from other faith groups, as seminaries provide instruction about the great world religions and host international travel, we at United will continue to find ways to help students and the public learn more about teachings and practices of other faiths. Already many of our best students find themselves helped by scholar Paul Knitter's thoughtful description of his own journey when he says, "I have come to understand that I have to look beyond the traditional borderlines of Christianity to find something that is vitally, maybe even essentially, important in the job of understanding and living the Christian faith: *other religions*." (Knitter, p. xi)

Every person preparing for the ministry or for community leadership must now be able to understand how people from other races, other lands, and other religions experience reality. Friendships, partnerships, and alliances are formed in many ways. It would be unthinkable for the church to encourage its members and especially its leaders to create barriers to bonding and obstacles to peace. In an increasingly pluralistic daily reality, we all need to know more about other religions. In this light, United deeply appreciates Twin Cities Public Television's partnership and the assistance of the Minnesota Council of Churches in developing ways to reach out through public television to people of many faiths.

**(3) We Will Need to Pay Attention to God's Special Love for the Poor and the Marginalized** – In many ways our suburban campus and mainline origins do not help us see the world as God would have us see it. We are called to bring to the table, in this case the classroom and library table as well as the communion table, the underprivileged, the newly arrived, racial and ethnic minorities, the displaced, the disabled, and others who suffer the pain of a broken world. If United does not act on this, it will be less than it should be, less than it needs to be.

We are called to stand at the heart of a grieving world that cries out for love and community. We commit ourselves to teaching students and inviting the public to cross borders of distrust and fear, to step into each other's lives and be surprised and delighted by our common humanity. This task will not be completed until all the "isms" of our time disappear – racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, even nationalism. It will not be completed until peace is the norm and human rights a heartfelt, world-wide commitment.

Today's seminary needs real diversity to be real about the Gospel it teaches and for its students to be effective in the ministries they seek. United is only beginning to achieve this. Course syllabi are broadly inclusive. Our student body has become more diverse; that needs to increase. We have begun to reach out to groups like Shiloh Temple and Lino Lakes correctional facility to share educational programs. There is much more to be done, and the doing of it will feed all our souls.

**(4) We Will Need to Focus on Spiritual Hunger in a "Be the Best You Can Be" Culture** – Many of us find ourselves in what David Brooks describes as today's new ideal of a "higher selfishness" in which "Self-cultivation is the imperative....this isn't a crass and vulgar selfishness, about narrow self-interest or mindless accumulation. This is...about making sure you get the most out of yourself, which means putting yourself in a job which is spiritually fulfilling, socially constructive, experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self-esteem boosting, perpetually challenging, and eternally edifying." (Taylor, p 477) We know from years of experience that this commitment is both exhausting and exhilarating, and we may be so preoccupied that we miss important needs.

Ours is a world that too easily ignores or misdirects spiritual hunger. Spiritual hunger grows both in settings of over-commitment and in settings of under-utilization such as poverty, unemployment, or meaningless employment. All people suffer from it. Across the age spectrum we sense an intense but diffuse quest for meaning and for authentic relationships and candid, thoughtful conversation.

At the end of the day we puzzle over the health of our souls. Our churches and our seminaries are challenged to read this bewilderment accurately. We once worried about cheap grace, but now must worry first about the problem of easy answers, too formulaic to last, too sloppy to be remembered. It is here that the seminary finds a critically important role – to prepare new leaders for a world hammered by too many messages to take any but the most thoughtful seriously, asked for too many loyalties to embrace any but those with the most urgency and integrity. We are challenged to be profoundly faithful and truly attentive. Our long-standing engagement with the arts is a great help as it guides us to experience life at a deeper level. We yearn for worship that honestly meets the needs of our souls and, as a seminary, are challenged to teach students how they might lead that kind of worship. We are challenged to listen with the heart at least as much as the mind and to teach our students to do so.

An attempt to meet this need at least in part is the most fundamental reason that the seminaries in the Twin Cities area have been working in partnership with the Guthrie – so

that the panelists and the people attending could speak to each other across the theater using, in part, the language of the play to discuss some of the most important subjects of our time. For *Macbeth* it was “power and the corruption of power.” For *Faith Healer*, it was the question of calling, commitment, subjectivity, integrity, and compassion.

The seminary is called to meet the need for honesty and faithfulness in its engagements with all its publics. The seminaries and the church share the challenge of helping people gain balance and wholeness in their lives. We will continue to encourage people to commit to crossing borders and having many kinds of people as friends. To profoundly experience God’s love for the poor, for victims, for the oppressed is to begin to see the world through God’s eyes. To fully include all people in the seminary community and to educate for ministries that are both welcoming and transforming is a sacred and complex task.

### **The Time to Build**

In his 1994 inaugural address, Nelson Mandela challenged his audience with the words, “The time for the healing of the wounds has come. The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The time to build is upon us.” This is the time for United to build. We are ready for a vigorous and faithful future. We will seek out partners to create new ways to provide theological education and to address the important questions of our time. We will empower new leaders, welcome everyone, care for the suffering, and build bridges across chasms of fear and distrust. We do this in fulfillment of Matthews’ Great Commission to make disciples of all nations and in fulfillment of the dreams of our founders. And so we join our new beginnings to God’s glad Easter Tidings. With you as our friends we journey into the future! May it be so.