June 4, 2020

Dear Hanafi Tanojo, Anne McAnelly and Nolan Carlen,

I write in support of San Francisco Theological Seminary’s remedial complain against COTE. The main question raise in the complaint are whether COTE and the Foundation have power to excommunicate SFTS from the PCUSA; and whether in effectively doing so, they have usurped the General Assembly’s power and denied due process to SFTS. We request that key references to the work of seminaries (approval for the administration of the Lord’s Supper, approval of Trustees and President, summary of activities) in COTE’s Report to the General Assembly which exclude SFTS be removed from the Consent Agenda, discussed and voted on as a separate items when GA convenes in June.

It is my view that COTE’s Report commits a grave injustice by violating due process. The materials submitted to GA about SFTS, it’s merger, and COTE’s process are misleading, perhaps intentionally so. Submissions by COTE to the General Assembly, currently live on the GA website, show the use of misdirection and other strategies to conceal the fact that COTE has taken upon itself to remove SFTS from the list of PCUSA seminaries. Instead of stating that the General Assembly will be deciding whether to cut SFTS off from funding and eject it from membership, COTE fails to inform the General Assembly that the acceptance of its report would result in the removal of SFTS from Institutional Membership. If COTE’s recommendations are approved on the Consent Agenda at GA, SFTS will be removed from Institutional Membership of the PCUSA without discussion, severing the denomination’s 150-year-old ties with the only PCUSA seminary in the Western U.S.

The loss would be a great blow to the Presbyterian congregants and pastors, who rely on its resources for preaching, adult education, pastor training, Commissioned Ruling Elder training, and scholarship that has long been important to Presbyterian life. SFTS’ commitment to and understanding of the peculiar culture of the West Coast is something that cannot be duplicated by or replicated in other institutions. It provides essential services to Presbyterian congregations in at least a dozen western states and is a source of important contextual theology informing the entire Church.

In reaching its decision to eliminate SFTS from the list of PCUSA seminaries, COTE repeatedly and deliberately flaunted due process – excluding SFTS from participation in broad dialogue and exploration, silencing our voices. This is an historic and unprecedented move in the life of the Presbyterian Church, built on a commitment to transparency and the democratic process of a voting majority.

I am requesting that GA avoid falling into the trap COTE has set, effectively excommunicating SFTS from the PCUSA. In addition, we request that COTE be instructed to include SFTS in its activities so long as the General Assembly continues to recognize SFTS as a PCUSA seminary,
and that COTE’s submissions to the 224 General Assembly be withdrawn and/or amended to allow deeper discussion and due process. I ask you to take every possible action to rectify this wrong and to secure SFTS appropriate place on the list of PCUSA Seminaries.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Rev. Dr. Kenton W. Smith, HR (San Jose Presbytery)

ADDENDUM

The preceding letter is a corporate generated appeal to you as our representatives to the 224th General Assembly to protect the thorough, transparent and democratic due process required in our Book of Order to include or exclude San Francisco Theological Seminary as a continuing member of our PCUSA seminaries. This appeal is not about the rational for including or excluding but the assurance of a faithful, public, deliberate orderly process of discovery that could be denied in a mere consent item. The added complication of a virtual GA intensifies the urgency to vote to deny the consent item because of the technical obstacles presented in a new and unprecedented virtual reality. The potential for grievous error and omission or worse intentional confusion or concealing of the truth is intensified by the loss of physically presence and interaction. This is a clear question of yes or no for justice for a 150 year old Presbyterian seminary whose body of historic work, influence and faithfulness to our denomination far exceeds the misunderstood but highly creative alliance cultivated with the University of Redlands during a precarious time of decline among all Christian traditions.

On a personal note, I am a grateful graduate of the SFTS Program in Christian Spirituality in Spiritual Direction (Diploma in Spiritual Direction, 1998) and the Doctor of Ministry (2011). I am also an M.Div. graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (1974), ordained in 1974, and served four PCUSA congregations over my career and now on the board of the Contemplative Center of Silicon Valley housed at Westhope Presbyterian Church. I was mentored by my first spiritual director, Howard Rice (chaplain SFTS and former moderator of GA) who nurtured me through a tragic congregational call that nearly broke my spirit to leave pastoral work. It was his wisdom that expedited my enrollment into the spiritual direction training program at SFTS. I cried for three days upon entry because I had found my true spiritual home. Overtime I not only credentialized as a spiritual director (DASD) and co-created Soul Work Studio (now merged with CCSV and through that ministry distributed $40,000 to CCSV) but completed my D.Min. with a dissertation in spiritual direction as an approach to pastoral leadership in Presbyterian churches. The seminary reached back to me and employed me as part-time trainer in the DASD and D.Min. for many years plus invited me onto the PCS Advisory Board. The influence, transformation, opportunity, and now lifelong relationship I have with the faculty of SFTS would be non-existent without this seminary. It prompted my wife and I to donate significantly and
yearly to SFTS through our family foundation. Honestly, without them I would be solidly out of the ministry in order to save my spirit. However, instead, I was graciously given by the Spirit of God an invitation back into pastoral work to re-create a transformed vision and understanding of the role of pastor as a spiritual guide. In short, my life as a Presbyterian pastor would have disappeared without this west coast seminary community.

My story is not alone, hundreds likely thousands of past, present, and future pastors, elders, and congregations have and will have similar stories erased and ignored by excluding SFTS among PCUSA seminaries. How is that possible? It would be a heartless act requiring years of conciliatory work among so many and for what?

In sincere appeal,

[Signature]