July 2018

Dear Friends,

July is my first month on the job as Acting Dean for Earlham School of Religion, and I’d like to take this opportunity to share a bit about the exciting work we’ve been engaged in and some highlights of what to expect in the coming months. This interim year is an incredibly important one for ESR as we reposition ourselves for a changing religious and graduate theological education landscape and prepare to welcome in a permanent Dean.

It is a challenging time for seminary education. MDiv enrollment has been declining across the country. Prominent schools such as Andover Newton, Claremont, Episcopal Divinity, Fuller, and even nearby Christian Theological in Indianapolis are moving to less expensive locations or merging with other schools to save costs.

Thankfully, ESR is in a solid financial position to maintain the quality and consistency of our educational programs. But we are not being complacent. I have outlined below the steps we are working on and will continue to develop with your help so that we will not merely survive amid significant change and challenge, but thrive – and do so in ways consistent with our mission to prepare individuals for leadership that empowers and for ministry that serves.

- In the fall of 2017 we began the process of developing our next 5-year strategic plan. Our goal is to have this finalized and approved by ESR’s Board of Advisors and Earlham College’s Board of Trustees this coming fall so that we can maintain momentum and have it available for candidates seeking the permanent Dean position. To accomplish this, we will be working over the summer to pull together working group proposals on curriculum, diversity, enrollment management, mission, and partnerships. Expect to hear more about this plan in the near future.

- Our curriculum committee is working on developing exciting new proposals for a reduced-credit MDiv with greater field experience throughout the program, a practical MA with a field education component to complement our current scholarly MA, and the possibility of ESR Access distance students to earn an emphasis such as Ministry of Writing, Pastoral Care, or Peace and Justice.

- We are committed to a student-centered vision for ESR, which includes the recent hire of Jonelle Ellis as our Director of Business and Student Services. In addition, Jonelle and April Vanlonden, our Director of Seminary Academic Services, are moving to the 2nd floor of ESR’s Classroom and Community Building to join Ryan Frame in Seminary Computing Services as part of a Student Services Hub. We are also working with the newly-launched Student Community Planning group to revise the Student Handbook and consider repurposing of space including the possibility of rededicating space that was originally intended as a Student Lounge. Our joint seminary computer lab is in need of simple upgrades such as better chairs to improve student experience, and all of our offices will be labeled to assist students and visitors in navigating campus.
- To complement these efforts we hope to hire a new position – Director of Student and Alumni Relations. The goals for this position are to respond to the clear and consistent calls from our students to offer greater support, to build community on campus, to help our students successfully complete their programs, and to maintain strong connections with them as they graduate and move into their ministries.

- We are engaged in an administrative reconfiguration which you will be hearing more about as we work collaboratively to right-fit people, positions, and institutional needs.

- We need to build upon our early success with the Lilly Endowment-supported Entrepreneurial Ministry Certificate and the Association of Theological Schools-supported Innovation Grant. Students from both of these groups will be presenting at our annual Leadership Conference this August, and I encourage you to attend to hear about their inspiring work. With the right support, we hope to both launch the Certificate as an important continuing feature of ESR’s programming for MDiv graduates, while also finding ways to continue to incorporate practical innovation skills and experiences into the entire curriculum.

- Demand for our live, video-based class and community experiences for distance students continues to grow. To meet this demand, we plan to build a third video cart so that we can more easily accommodate multiple courses, common meals, and meetings that rely upon live video to bring our students and faculty at a distance right onto campus with us.

- As part of this broader technology initiative we hope to make discrete upgrades to Quigg Worship Room that maintain its character but also improve audio and visual quality in the space for both those on campus and those joining from a distance.

- We are working to develop a new scholarship opportunity for distance students who work for Quaker organizations as a way to partner with and resource the broader Quaker movement with the graduate educational tools ESR can provide.

- We continue to build upon our relationships with Earlham College and Bethany Theological Seminary, including finding innovative ways to advertise, educate, and serve in ways only our unique partnership can.

I hope you will join me in making an investment in these important projects. Together we can strengthen ESR to continue its role as the Quaker seminary – providing a unifying educational space for Friends and others who value the opportunity to study at a non-creedal Christian graduate theological school committed to Quaker values.

Thank you for taking the time to read this important update on our work. If you have any questions or would like to speak with me about any of the above or any other matters, I would love to hear from you.

In gratitude,

Matt Hisrich