Moving Forward

by Chris Marlin-Warfield

Over a year ago, the University of Chicago approached Chicago Theological Seminary about acquiring the Seminary’s main building and McGiffert House. Considering whether to sell current buildings and move into a new building at a new location raised concerns and questions. Why should the Seminary move? How would a new building meet the Seminary’s needs? What would move with the Seminary? How would the CTS community grieve what it left behind, while celebrating a future in a new place?

Over time, questions were answered and concerns addressed. On June 30, 2008, papers consummating the transaction were signed by Board Chair Don Clark and President Susan Thistlethwaite at the offices of CTS’ attorneys.

What follows is a summary of how CTS came to write this new chapter of its history.

Deciding to Move

It has long been known that CTS’ current buildings were no longer ideal for the School’s mission and vision. The main building was originally designed for housing and office space; it was never designed to hold classes. McGiffert House has not been a viable residence for some time. Before McGiffert was converted to office space and rented to the University of Chicago, it was under-occupied. Furthermore, the financial issues which prompted the Seminary to rent McGiffert House, Davis Hall, and the upper floors of Fisk Hall to the University meant that those spaces could no longer be used by the Seminary for its own programming.
Finally, there is little room for expansion as current programs grow and new ones are created.

The inquiry from the University of Chicago prompted CTS to engage in a strategic review of its existing facilities. As with the decision in 1914 to move to Hyde Park, and consistent with CTS ideals, the school’s mission, vision, and commitments became the primary focus of the analysis. In this context, the physical goal became clear: create a space for the Seminary that is adequate to its current needs and future growth.

The process of making a decision about the Seminary’s facilities had two separate but related tracks. On one track was a discussion of what would be needed to transform the current buildings into structures that met the Seminary’s programming needs, including both immediately needed repairs and major space renovations. On the second track was consideration of the University’s proposal to purchase the Seminary’s buildings and construct a new home for CTS.

While the Seminary seriously considered both of these options—recreating the existing structure vs. creating a brand new one—there was an essential unity of conviction that the institution needed to undertake a serious and sustained commitment to both its future financial stability and the viability of its buildings and facilities so that the school’s mission could be effectively pursued.

Staying the course in the current building was never an option; every path into the Seminary’s future would involve reconstituting the school’s relationship with the physical space it occupies.

As part of the first track, HPZS Architectural Group conducted an audit of the main building and McGiffert House to determine what would be required to remediate deferred maintenance, improve safety, and replace...
systems that were at the end of their normal service lives. The work that would have been necessary on McGiffert House and the main building, from the perspective of the Seminary’s finances, would have been quite substantial.

Meanwhile, Nevin Hedlund Architects worked to determine what renovations might be made to the existing seminary buildings in order to meet the seminary’s needs. Possibilities for renovation included the addition of compact shelving to the library, the enclosure of the garth and the addition of several classrooms around the cloisters, more student lockers, the shuffling of various offices, and the opening up of space for CTS’ new institutes and centers. The estimate for staying and renovating the seminary buildings exceeded twenty-five million dollars. While this cost may have made staying in the current buildings prohibitively expensive, several ideas produced from the conversation with Nevin Hedlund Architects affected thinking about the possibility of a new building: a general reception area, improved handicapped accessibility, a student center, tutoring spaces, smart classrooms, improved parking, spaces for large events, and so forth.

On the second track, a Board-appointed committee explored a possible agreement with the University of Chicago, negotiating the fundamental terms of an agreement between the Seminary and the University with a primary focus on the current and future needs of the Seminary as clarified by the mission of the school. Once the outline of an agreement was accepted by the University, the Board of Trustees voted to appoint a committee made up of Board Chair Don Clark, President Susan Thistlethwaite, President-Elect Alice Hunt, and Trustee Richard Harter to negotiate the final terms of the transaction.

During both of these processes—which ran in tandem for some time—the administration of the Seminary sought and was given invaluable input by the Seminary community through meetings with faculty, staff, and students, a special meeting at the 2008 Ministerial Institute with alumni/æ, and discussions that took place on the electronic bulletin board and via email.

By engaging in these open discussions, the entire Seminary community was involved in the decision making process: concerns about the potential agreement with the University were addressed and possible features of the design of a new building were solicited and given.

This process of deciding the physical future of the Seminary has likely been as difficult as the decision to move to Hyde Park almost one hundred years ago. For every moment of excitement, there has been one of worry; for every moment of hope, one of doubt; for every moment of happiness, one of concern. What is certain, however, is that throughout the process, the Seminary has acted as a community whose members have been making a decision about their future—and the future of those who come after them—in an open, honest, and compassionate way. Susan Thistlethwaite reflects on the transaction, “In the end, it was hard emotionally to sign the final papers, despite all the work that had gone into the negotiations. But the agreement was so favorable to CTS, and the process was sound, I believe. What I am most proud of is that we went through it together—students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni/æ and visiting committee. I think we took ‘shared governance’ out, not just for a test-drive, but for a serious performance work-out, and I think many of us were tired but happy with how it worked out.”

When asked how he felt the decision making process went, Mr. Clark stated: “This difficult and important decision benefited from a process of community wide education, deliberation and collaboration that reflected CTS at its best. We not only made an important decision for the institution, we also learned how best to process future challenges facing the community.”

President Alice Hunt notes this honest, vulnerable, hard and complicated conversation process as one of the factors which made her so enthusiastic about joining the community: “That our CTS communities are willing to engage in difficult discourse bodes well for our future as we strive to be all that we might be.”

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Hi gh l i g h t s  o f  T h e  a g r e e m e n T

The actual agreement between the University of Chicago and the Seminary runs several hundred pages. Several highlights of the agreement are noted here.

First, the University of Chicago paid the Seminary eleven million dollars for the main CTS building and McGiffert House at the closing of the deal on June 30. These funds have been placed in the Seminary’s endowment, where they will contribute to the Seminary’s financial stability. While this amount of money is cause for some celebration, Mr. Clark has made clear throughout this process that this money will not erase the Seminary’s financial challenges, which have existed since before the school opened in 1858. However, according to Mr. Clark, CTS has established a financial foundation upon which it can build. The transaction will allow CTS to chart its own future; opportunities and options will less frequently be foreclosed by significant financial constraints.

In addition to this payment, the University of Chicago will construct a new Seminary building, a project for which it will pay up to $33 million. The University will cover many of the operating costs of the new building, including maintenance of the new building’s systems (air conditioning, electrical, elevators, and so forth). Furthermore, the University will pay all of the utilities in the new building for the first ten years of the Seminary’s occupancy. The new building will be owned by the University and rented by the Seminary for one dollar each year for 100 years.

Quite naturally, concerns were raised that the Seminary now only owns property serving as the President’s House and an apartment building that houses some faculty. The Seminary had considered relocating to a property which it could own. Several factors affect the option of owning property. First, the construction and maintenance of a new building would represent a significant investment for the institution. According to a study conducted by the National Association of Home Builders in 2007, while some components of a building may last one hundred years or more (concrete and brick structures such as fireplaces, walls, and chimneys), many last for a much shorter period of time. Moreover, while the physical structures may last, changes in technology and so forth would lower the effective life expectancy of several components. A constant mission and changing world have never allowed the Seminary to stay in the same location for a century. The construction and maintenance of a new, Seminary-owned and operated building, in short, would have meant a significant investment with continued costs.

Benefits for CTS from the agreement are numerous. The lack of student housing has been a concern for the Seminary community for the last several years, especially after McGiffert House ceased to function as an apartment building for Seminary students. This transaction with the University of Chicago will give CTS students access to University student housing—up to thirty units, available immediately, in a combination of single and family units near the location of the new building. The provision of student housing will help the Seminary, though it is admittedly not a complete solution to the challenges CTS students face seeking housing in the Hyde park area. The prices of University housing (currently ranging from $588/mo. for a studio to $1413/mo. for a three-bedroom apartment) are within the normal price range for Hyde Park, but they are still cost-prohibitive for some students.

Additional financial benefits accrue from the final arrangement. As of June 30, the University of Chicago assumed responsibility for the operation and maintenance of the current Seminary main building and McGiffert House, alleviating some of the Seminary’s financial burdens. Moreover, while the Seminary continues to inhabit these buildings, the University will continue to pay rent for those parts of the buildings that it occupies. Over the next several years, until the Seminary moves to the new building, this arrangement will contribute to the Seminary’s budget. Meanwhile, the new building will offer opportunities to raise revenue through a well-crafted capital campaign, which may include venues for celebrating generous patrons of the institution in the new facility.
BUILDING A NEW HOME

As part of the agreement, CTS has the right to move various historical or religious architectural elements of the current building to the new building. Currently, a design committee composed of Board Chair Don Clark, First Vice Chair Verlee Copeland, President Alice Hunt, Academic Dean Ted Jennings, and Professors Ted Jennings and Scott Haldeman is soliciting input from the Seminary community about what items in the current building should be considered for relocation, and how such items might be incorporated into the design of the new building. Maintenance of the Seminary’s unique identity is at the heart of these considerations.

The committee is currently working with input from the Seminary community to determine the design of the Seminary’s new home. This is not a simple project, and as of this writing, the plans for the specific design of the new building are preliminary. Current plans call for a four-story, 75,000 square foot structure crowned with a rooftop garden. The top story may house a semi-circular chapel with room for three hundred people and a connected dining space capable of seating two hundred people.

The design plans to incorporate several of the aspects suggested during the previous facilities audit: conference rooms, larger classrooms, breakout spaces, space for the various centers, and space to accommodate the expansion of Seminary programs as time goes on.

The form of the new building will follow its function. Greg Briggs, Director of Facilities, Housing and Events at CTS shares, “A new building is a chance to establish new ways of doing things.” That is, the opportunity to radically transform the physical space of the Seminary is also an opportunity to rethink how the Seminary works: how the staff and faculty work, how members of the community interact, and so on.

CTS has retained consultants as it considers how the new space can most effectively serve its mission, including Paul Steinbrecher of IDEA Architects, who is focusing on space planning. Mr. Steinbrecher has worked with many complex institutional bodies, including faith-based groups such as Fourth Presbyterian Church and the Disciples Divinity House. He also has a personal connection to the Seminary, because his father stayed in Davis Hall while a law student at the University. He is tasked with gathering perspectives on the physical accommodations needed for Seminary programs and community life. He has already met with most of the staff and meetings with the faculty and students are ongoing in a process that will be iterative, with information flowing from the community through Mr. Steinbrecher to the design committee and architects and back again over the next several months. He writes:

The staff, faculty and students of CTS are demonstrating remarkable candor and thoughtfulness in formulating answers to questions regarding everything from basic building needs such as filing space or classroom design to envisioning new ways of communicating both within the seminary as well as with the larger Hyde Park community and beyond. The process has only just begun, but the overall impression that I have been given is that there is an eagerness to share visions of what is possible in a new building, and a parallel interest in making sure that the unique culture and historic integrity of CTS as an incubator for excellence in theological training and developing ministry.

Because the most basic design decisions must be made for the architects by fall, the design committee has been working busily through the summer. The committee named an advisory committee to assist it with the consultation of various Seminary constituencies: Three faculty (Tim Sandoval, Julia Speller, and Neil Gerdes), three staff (Jenei Grigg, Greg Briggs, and Lin Sanford Keppert), three students (Adam Bohanan, Kat Cook, and David Reese), and two Board of Trustees members (Martha Page Greene and another to be named). The committee has also met with experts on stained glass, organs, and others who can provide vital information as to what parts of the current building can move to the Seminary’s new home and what is the best way to move those items.

At this time, decisions about the specific features of the new space, including which elements of the current Seminary building might be moved have not been made. It is likely that various parts of the Thorndike Hilton Chapel will be taken for the small chapel to be located on the first floor of the new building. It is also likely that the Reneker Organ will not be taken (for more information see the side panels on pages 23 and 24). Other determinations yet to be made involve the possibilities of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, as well as acoustics, lighting, educational technologies, and food services.

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Among the items currently slated to be moved to the new Seminary building are the stained-glass windows in the Thorndike Hilton Chapel. Modeled on those of Chartres Cathedral, the windows depict thirty-three scenes significant to Christianity, including: David and Jonathan, Joseph interpreting dreams, John and Mary returning from Calvary, Hannah, Samuel, and Eli, Jesus and the rich young ruler, the conversion of Saul, the nativity, the baptism of Jesus, and the glorified Savior.

A manual for meditation was once written specifically for use in the Hilton Chapel, offering meditations on topics brought to mind by the windows listed above: friendship, honesty, filial love, mother’s love, decision, meeting God, nativity, consecration, and the majesty of Christ.

Current plans are to feature these inspirational windows in a small meditation chapel on the first floor of the new building.

In the same manual for meditation is a prayer for the Seminary, originally offered by the first CTS Professor, the Reverend Joseph Haven, on the date of his inauguration: October 20, 1858. One hundred fifty years later, it remains timely and fitting:

And now, O God, we commend to thee this institution. Be thou its strength and its defense. Guard it against the dangers to which it may be exposed. Sustain it during its years of infancy, and the struggles of its growth and early manhood. Raise up helpers for it in its darkest hours.

Let no dissensions or jealousies spring up among those who sustain it, to diminish its strength or mar its usefulness. Let it be a fountain open for the healing of the nations. May its streams mingle with the great current of the world’s thought and feeling, to make it purer and better.

When they who now with prayer and faith open and consecrate this institution, shall have passed away from the scenes of earthy toil, may its streams, pure and sweet, still flow on to bless the world, and make glad the city of our God, until they shall at last be swallowed up in the river of life that flows from beneath thy throne.

The Thorndike Hilton Chapel Windows

Liminal Space

Chicago Theological Seminary stands on a threshold. Over the past year or so, the Seminary has seen a new Chair of the Board and a new President, as well as the sale of its two most used buildings. Over the next several years—the tentative start date for occupancy of the new building is 2012—the Seminary community will do something that all, or at least most, of its members have done at least once, and probably several times, before: pack up boxes, put them on a truck, and go to a new place, a strange place. For some, the next few years will be a time of excitement and joy, a time when a new adventure is beckoning the Seminary into a bright future. For others, the next few years will be a time of trepidation, a time of saying goodbye to a noble time in a historic space. For most, one suspects, it will be both.

Fortunately, the Seminary was born into a heritage of many who courageously set out for new places. Abram and Sarai left Haran with little more than a promise—albeit a promise from the Almighty; Moses fled to Midian in the knowledge of what would happen if he stayed in Egypt, and he later left the safety of Midian to return to Egypt upon hearing God’s call; the Hebrews left Egypt with the promise of a land they did not yet know; Jonah reluctantly accepted his commission and traveled to Nineveh; Naomi and Ruth set out for Bethlehem with nothing but their faith in family. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus journeyed to Egypt to avoid Herod’s slaughter; The Gospel of Luke places Jesus’ ministry on a long journey to Jerusalem, a journey toward persecution, death, resurrection and ascension; the apostles went on journeys to proclaim the Good News; Saul met Jesus while on a journey to Damascus, and travelled extensively to preach Christ; Martin Luther went to Wartburg to hide; the Pilgrims went to the Netherlands, and later came to North America, to preserve their way of life. Many journeys have been undertaken under duress and travesty — the journey from Africa to America, the Trail of Tears, the Irish Dispersion during the Famine, Cambodians fleeing the Khmer Rouge, the list goes on. These stories are stories of CTS, because they tell of members of the Seminary community past and present.

The members of today’s Seminary community have undertaken their own journeys: to Chicago to study; to outside communities through the Center for the Community Transformation, Clinical Pastoral Education, and other field placements. Each student takes a journey through faith, into illuminating and provocative scholarship, and into a sober and exhilarating understanding of the responsibilities waiting in the world of transformative ministry. Some of these journeys are undertaken with hope and joy, others with fear and trepidation, and many — perhaps most — with a mixture of all of these emotions.

The University of Chicago will probably replace McGiffert House with a new structure, but the main building will remain

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The Reneker Organ

While several items may be relocated from the current Seminary building to the new location, the Reneker Organ is not currently among those items that the Seminary plans to move. Designed and built by Karl Wilhelm, whose various instruments are used throughout the United States and Canada, the Reneker Organ exemplifies the type of instrument used in Northern Germany during the Baroque period (about 1600 to 1750), and was installed in 1984.

The organ is named for Robert W. Reneker and Betty C. Reneker. Robert Reneker was the ninth Chair of the Board of Trustees of the University of Chicago, and the Reneker Fund was begun upon his death in 1981. Betty Reneker was an active member of the United Church of Christ, serving on the Commission of Christian Unity (which helped bring about the creation of the UCC) and on the personnel committees of the Illinois Conference and Chicago Metropolitan Association of the UCC. Mrs. Reneker joined the Board of Trustees in 1967, served twice as interim president in 1970 and 1984, was Chair of the Board from 1976 to 1981, was honored with a Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) in 1981, and was honored with the Graham Taylor Award in Public Ministry in 1994. She passed away in 2002. Mrs. Reneker’s dedication to the Seminary was near absolute, as her service and her many substantial financial gifts demonstrate.

While the Renekers’ service to CTS will always be remembered, the Seminary has been advised not to move the organ that is named after them. Ornate and complex, the organ was tailored to the space in which it resides. Saying nothing of the enormous expense and difficulty of moving the organ’s console and its 1,640 pipes, the main chapel in the new building will have neither a layout nor the acoustics fitting to this majestic instrument. The greater honor will be to leave the organ in its current location, where it can continue to be used effectively, and pay tribute the life of service that Mrs. Reneker embodied during her time on this earth.