July 30, 2012

Dear RTS Orlando alumni,

This marks the end of my second year as president of RTS Orlando, and I want to give you a sense of what is happening on our beautiful campus.

You may remember my letter last year when I told you we would pray for you. Well, we have. We begin each week outside of my office with a prayer meeting praising God and asking for his blessing on our students, faculty and alumni.

It is hard to know where to begin. I have nothing but praise for our faculty: Mark Futato, Scott Swain, John Frame, Reggie Kidd, Scott Redd, Mike Glodo, Chuck Hill, Steve Childers, Jim Coffield, Scott Coupland, John Muether and guest/adjunct faculty such as Steve Brown, Bob Orner, Larry Kirk, Richard Pratt, Keith Johnson, Ryan Reeves and Sharon Hersh. They are the ones who impart not just content, but godliness and a love for Christ and his Word.

We’ve had some personnel changes this year.
1) Mark Futato (pictured far right) finished as Academic Dean and will be back in the classroom full time.
2) Scott Swain (pictured on the left) is our new academic dean.
3) Scott Redd, former OT faculty and Dean of Students, has moved to the RTS Washington D.C. campus as president.
4) Bob Orner will step into the role of Dean of Students.
5) One of our recent graduates, Leigh Swanson, whose husband is pastor of First Pres Orlando, will become Assistant Dean of Students beginning August 15.
6) Tom Nelson stepped down as Director of Admissions. He graduated in May and is seeking to plant a church.
7) Kevin Collins has joined us as Director of Admissions.
8) Sharon Hersh, guest faculty who has taught two signature counseling classes for us for 7 years, has been approved as adjunct faculty.

We are so grateful for the work of the outgoing Mark, Scott and Tom, and we are thankful for those God has led to step into these roles.

What else is new here?
• As you know, our campus is 14 years “young.” But it was built before the digital revolution. So we converted our first classroom to a “smart and sharp” classroom this year. It looks great. We have six to go.
• We cleared away some brush to open the waterfront more, and put in a beautiful dock and gazebo, which has quickly become a favorite place to sit and reflect.

• We put in a playground so that young families of students feel welcome to come on campus and enjoy the beauty.

• We launched the Nicole Instituted for Baptist Studies officially this past spring. This institute lays out the welcome mat for those coming from non-Presbyterian backgrounds yet who are pursuing ordination. It is named after our beloved colleague Roger. The first class for NIBS will start in the winter of 2013. Every other year, NIBS will host a Spurgeon Lectureship. Our first speaker next year (April 10, 2013) will be John Piper speaking on The Life and Ministry of C.H. Spurgeon. Al Mohler of Southern Seminary has agreed to be our second Spurgeon lecturer in the next round.

• We started an MDiv with a counseling emphasis, and launched two one-year certificates in theological studies and biblical studies.

• This past year our One School One Book event involved reading Leland Ryken’s The Legacy of the King James Bible (for the KJV’s 400th anniversary). This fall our One School One Book event will involve reading together The Crescent Through The Eyes of the Cross by Nabeel Jabbour. Dr. Jabbour will lecture on the book on our campus on November 13 and possibly the 12th too.

• This year we passed our 10 year accreditation! Part of our resolves for the days ahead involve a special focus on Islam so that students are familiar with the entire spectrum of the Muslim world and are more effectively trained to love Muslims to Christ. RTS will be the only seminary in the US to require students to take a class about Islam, which is being offered on Monday nights this fall! Join us if you can, even as an auditor.

• Each month I bring in a guest to interview and interact with our students at a President’s Community Forum. You can view these on our website at www.rts.edu/orlando/presforums

This past year’s guests included:

Richard Pratt  Theological Education for the Global Church
Ray Cortese  Gospel Leadership
Greg Livingstone  Ministering to the Untouched, Unengaged, Unloved
Admiral Redd  The Pastor’s role in a Layman’s Life
David Outing  Jobs Partnership
Rufus Smith  Multi-ethnic Ministry
Michael Card  Christ and Community
Steve Brown  Three Free Sins
Steve Douglass  The Opportunities and Challenges of Fulfilling the Great Commission

• This May we had 57 students graduate. Our services were held at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Sanford. Dr. David Swanson, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, gave the commencement address on “Start with the End in Mind.”
• Speaking of Sanford, it has been in the news this year with the Trayvon Martin killing. I have participated with other pastors in praying for help and healing in that community.
• In June RTS Orlando partnered with the Gospel Coalition and had 30 volunteers serve at their 2012 National Women’s Conference. Christina and I hosted an RTS lunch there. It was a wonderful weekend.
• Dr. Bob Orner and I have been leading a weekly lunch meeting called Pastors in Training (PIT), where we facilitate guided discussions on “all those things they supposedly never teach you at seminary.”
• Unlike most seminaries, we are not that far removed from “real life.” We are five minutes away from UCF, which is now the second largest public university in the US! We try to be a missional presence in our community. Our Oviedo Counseling Clinic serves many people from the community each year. We have two churches—Northland Oviedo and Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church—that meet for worship on our campus each Sunday. Many homeowners associations use our facilities each month. The Oviedo Police Department holds some of its training and banquets on campus. And our facilities are a voting poll on election days. These are little things, but we really want to be a blessing to our community.
• And of course, RTS Orlando is part of the entire and growing RTS system with great training centers in Jackson, Charlotte, Washington, Atlanta, Houston, Memphis and Virtual. While we are grateful for the amazing online distance opportunities, we continue to believe that nothing is more personal, tactile and powerful as face to face, person to person training. This means we are firm believers in the value of residential seminary training.
• We are also thankful for the ministry of Ric Cannada as he steps down as RTS Chancellor, and for the presence of Mike Milton, who will be inaugurated as Chancellor this coming September.

So who comes to RTS Orlando? All kinds of people! Most of our students are training to be pastors (church planters and revitalizers), but not all. We have some who train to be counselors, missionaries, scholars, apologists, ministry leaders, worship leaders and chaplains. We have some who are coming to engage in a second career. We have students who are former police officers and Air Force Academy graduates. We have occasional lawyers, doctors or business people who want to think Christianly about what they do.

One of our May graduates is a film maker; another aspires to be a country singer! It’s an amazing variety.

We think of ourselves as kind of an Ellis Island of the Reformed world. We want to give students an education that is biblical, Reformed and missional so that each student leaves us with a mind for truth, a heart for God and a life for ministry.
We want to bless you too! Audit a class (rts.edu/Orlando/academics/upcomingclasses). We have new and traditional offerings. Go to our Web site and listen to a President’s Community Forum. Or tune into a chapel message on iTunes. And if you let us know how we can pray for you, we will pray! (You can write out your prayer requests and return them in the enclosed business reply envelope.)

The word seminary means “seed bed” or “nursery.” Like a nursery, we help people grow in the right directions so they can bear much fruit. We are thankful for how God has used RTS in your life. We rejoice in you.

Of course, I would not be doing my job if I did not remind you that the education of RTS students is subsidized by about 66%. And of the remaining 33% that a student is charged for tuition, we offer healthy scholarships. How can that happen? Only with the help and sacrifice of people who give generously because they know that training pastors and leaders is such a strategic kingdom investment. They do not want to see our students graduate with a boatload of debt. If God has prospered you, will you pray about helping us?

Will you prayerfully consider becoming an annual RTS ORLANDO PARTNER? A “partner” is a friend who gives an annual gift of at least $1,000, and by that says—we want to help with student scholarships and invest in this strategic work for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. You may have already given generously this year and for that, I thank you! Of course, a gift of any size not only helps, but is greatly needed and so appreciated during this challenging economic season.

We are cheering for you as you use your gifts to serve the Lord wherever he has placed you. May God richly bless you in the days ahead. Thanks for letting me share this update.

Yours in His Service,

Don Sweeting, Ph.D.
President
James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Church History
Blog: chiefendofman.org
www.rts.edu/orlando