

A Few Words from the Director

February 2010

I came away from our recent convocation, which featured addresses by sociologist Christian Smith and practical theologian Rick Osmer, with many provocative questions about the educational mission of our churches. I wanted to engage in a much longer conversation than the time available to us allowed, and I am sure I am not alone. From the time the last session was over, numerous people who attended that event have told me that they were both stimulated and challenged by the information and ideas to which they were exposed that morning.

To illustrate, let me refer here to just one of the subjects that came up at the convocation I would like us to examine in greater depth. It arose at the start of Osmer's presentation, when he was framing his response to the things we had heard in the previous hour in Smith's review of the findings of his research on the religious and spiritual lives of emergent adults. In passing Rick observed that one of the implications of Christian's presentation was that now more than ever we find ourselves living in a "post-Christendom" setting. So it does not make sense any more for us to assume that the cultural environment we face is one that is supportive of the beliefs and practices espoused by our churches.

Admittedly, that is not exactly a news flash. We have been hearing this sort of thing for a long time, and it is so familiar now in mainline Protestant circles at least that it is almost a cliché. But it is one thing to acknowledge it is true and quite another to act on it in an appropriate way. I say that because I find it difficult to imagine how we could avoid seriously rethinking our entire approach to ministry if we really thought Osmer's claim was true. If we really thought our churches stood for something that was significantly at variance with the wider culture, wouldn't we need to rethink our strategy? And wouldn't we assume that we should be acting in ways that were out of step with the wider culture in important respects? But rarely have I found that to be the operative assumption in the conversations about the church's life to which I have been exposed in recent years. Instead of calling into question the strategy we inherited from the days when our churches had some reason to believe they inhabited a supportive environment, people have acted as though we have no alternative but to stick with that strategy, doing whatever it takes to keep up the latest trends and "fit in."

I focus on that issue because I think it is at the core of the conversation about the educational mission of our churches that those of us in the Institute's leadership hope to bring about in the coming year. But it is just one of several such issues, and I use it simply to illustrate what is in store for those of us who will be taking part in this initiative. It is just a sample, in other words, and I hope it will encourage many of you who were present at the convocation to join us at the event we have planned for Saturday, [April 17](#) at Virginia Theological Seminary, when the next phase of the conversation will unfold.

R. Bruce Douglass, Director

Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington