

## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

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**Brian K. Blount**

Dear Friends,

Community Witness is one of the three highlighted roles in the seminary's new curriculum that will launch in the Fall Semester of 2013. Each of the three roles represents a critical, curricular learning outcome. Because of what students learn in the classroom, supervised ministry, and other related learning environments, we expect them to be better witnesses to and for the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in every communal setting their ministries encounter: social, economic, political, environmental, and religious. At Union Presbyterian Seminary, we want to do more than teach content; we want to incubate and inspire pastoral theologians and congregational leaders who will be communal change agents.

"*Sure you do,*" one very engaged member of our seminary community said. "*You certainly do on paper.*" She was, at the time, holding up a few pieces of paper that were bound into a book. One of my books. *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*. She showed me pages marked up with her highlights and scribbled notes in the margins. She was particularly interested, at the moment of our conversation, about my claim that God was on the loose in the world, engaging and transforming the world through the agency of Jesus of Nazareth. "*Is God still loose in the world today?*" she inquired. "*To be sure,*" I answered. "*And are you still teaching the Gospel of Mark and making this claim?*" she inquired. "*I am,*" I answered. "*Then, shouldn't you be teaching the Gospel of Mark here at Boaz and Ruth so that your students have opportunity to engage our students and our graduates?*"

Boaz and Ruth works with ex-offenders who have been incarcerated in various Virginia penal institutions. The CEO, Martha Rollins, some years ago created this non-profit that assists ex-offenders by providing them with skills that translate into meaningful job opportunities so they can reclaim productive space in society. Boaz and Ruth graduates have spent countless hours learning trade skills and rethinking their orientation to the world around them. At the center of it all is Martha's deep commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and her understanding of Jesus as an agent for change in the lives of individuals and communities.

Knowing all of that, I also knew my answer to Martha. "Yes." And so I am. Teaching Mark to seminary students in the context of Boaz and Ruth students from whom we will learn what it means to be faced with and changed by the transforming power of Jesus of Nazareth. In this context, engaged with this community, I have the sense that the Gospel of Mark and Jesus' powerful ministry will come alive in invigorating and challenging ways. Community Witnessing kinds of ways!

In the coming years, each of our faculty will be rethinking how they teach their courses with this curricular goal in mind. I cannot wait to see how our courses will change as our faculty responds to the pressure of preparing students to be community witnesses who are on the loose in God's world.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian".

Brian K. Blount, President