

The View from the Dean's Office

By Uriah Y. Kim

Our new Dean reflects on the exceptional students, innovative scholarship, and bright future of the GTU.

On my first day of work at the GTU in January, I lifted all the window shades in the Dean's office to let the light in and saw the panoramic view of Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay unfold before my eyes. I couldn't believe anyone would lower the shades, ever, when there was such gorgeous scenery to enjoy.

About an hour later I realized why previous GTU Deans had to lower at least some of the shades. The sunlight in the office is blinding, and the corner where my desk is located got very warm very quickly. I guess it is possible to have too much of a good thing!

In my first semester as Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs, I have realized I have much to learn about the ins and outs of this office—the metaphorical one as well as the physical one. I would describe my first few weeks on the job as a bit like drinking water from a fire hose: a flood of new information to process, many people to meet and know, a myriad of tasks and meetings to oversee, and the complexity of the GTU to understand. Even for an alum like myself who is quite familiar with the GTU, the GTU can be a bit overwhelming. But when I spoke with my wife on the phone during those first few weeks, she observed, “Your voice sounds so vibrant and happy.”

She's right. I am extremely happy and excited to be the Dean of the GTU. It's always been my dream job to have an office on top of the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library—and this is, indeed, a perk I'll fully enjoy and utilize. But even more, I am excited because of the opportunities and bright future I see for the GTU's next 50 years.

If we were to define the central characteristics of the GTU over its first 50 years (GTU 1.0, if you will), we might say the GTU's first five decades have been marked by its ecumenical spirit and its interdisciplinary approach to studying religion and theology. These characteristics are absolutely essential to the GTU,

part of our collective DNA, and they will certainly continue to shape our educational endeavors. But I believe that during its second 50 years (GTU 2.0), the GTU will be known for its entrepreneurial spirit and interreligious engagement. These qualities are already present now, but will continue to expand in the years and decades to come. I'm tremendously excited to be part of a talented and dedicated group of faculty, students, staff, trustees, and alumni that will shape and steer the GTU through the next chapter of its history.

The GTU is a remarkable and unique institution, what business expert and author Seth Godin would call a “purple cow,” standing out among the monochrome schools in the theological landscape of North America. The GTU is different, and we like it that way. But is it just our impression that the GTU is special? Exactly how is the GTU unique?

For evidence that the GTU is remarkable, just look to our students. GTU students are “blue-collar scholars” who are not afraid of getting their hands and feet dirty. Unlike Rapunzel from the old fairy tale, GTU students refuse to stay isolated in the (ivory) tower, expecting others to climb up. Instead, our students go to the village where the people are. Students who choose the GTU value passionate doing as much as rigorous thinking. GTU programs emphasize the interaction between theory and praxis, and studying amid the diversity of Holy Hill helps students deepen their compassion and care for the world and all of its people. To borrow an image from the Mount of Transfiguration episode in Matthew 17:1-9, GTU students don't



detach from the “real world” and isolate themselves within a community of scholars. Our students don’t have the luxury of leaving behind what goes on in the village when they walk through Berkeley; they see what ails the vast majority of people every day. They know that the knowledge and wisdom they acquire through their study and work are urgently needed. Ironically, in my opinion, it is not just the vast opportunities that the GTU offers but also the challenges students experience during their time here that help them become remarkable scholars, teachers, leaders, and activists.

As I have continued to consider what makes the GTU exceptional, I have been struck by something so obvious that perhaps those closest to the GTU take it for granted. The GTU is an indisputable leader in producing women scholars. This distinction needs to be understood in the current state of theological education to be fully appreciated. According to Daniel Aleshire, the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, “The gender distribution of faculty [at ATS member schools] has been overwhelm-

ingly stable. In 1994, women comprised just over 20 percent of the total of all faculty, and two decades later, they still comprise just over 20 percent” (ATS State of the Industry Webinar, September 18, 2015). While those faculty percentages are discouraging, statistics regarding the percentage of women in doctoral programs in religion are even more noteworthy. Among the GTU’s fourteen peer schools that have a PhD program, the percentage of women students ranged between 6.9% and 8.3% from 2010 to 2015. Since these peer schools are major suppliers of faculty to the ATS schools, it’s not surprising that the percentage of women serving on the faculty of ATS schools has remained unchanged for more than 20 years.

In comparison, during those same years, between 29.0% and 38.7% percent of the GTU’s doctoral students have been women. The GTU has had four times more women than its peer schools as measured by percentage of women in its doctoral student body. And the percentage is increasing. At the start of the Spring 2017 semester, 41.3% of GTU doctoral students were

“Students who choose the GTU value *passionate doing as much as rigorous thinking.*”

women. If we include MA students, the percentage goes up to 43.4%. Furthermore, women make up 44% percent of the students enrolled in all degree programs across the GTU consortium.

Why does the GTU attract more women than its peer schools? One main reason, I believe, is the composition of the GTU faculty. Based on my count, out of 107 full-time consortial faculty, 42 are women. That's 40% of the GTU consortial faculty. Out of 56 core doctoral faculty members, 23 are women. That's 41%. The GTU has reached the critical mass of women faculty to attract women students—and that's great. But in order to continue to be the definitive leader and role model in recruiting, nurturing, and developing women scholars over the next 50 years, we need to

do more. If setting a target is helpful, then let's set a realistic target: 50% by 2030!

I believe the GTU is building a critical mass of interreligious thinkers with entrepreneurial spirit who will take the wisdom, principles, and insights from various religious traditions and engage the critical issues of the twenty-first century. We painfully learned in 2016 that people from all walks of life lack the basic ability to communicate and understand across differences and divisions; some have exploited this situation in order to advance their agendas. The GTU is about building bridges, enabling the exchange of ideas, and building connections between people, rather than raising walls that will isolate ideas and peoples. Our newly designed doctoral and master's pro-

grams will take advantage of GTU's resources and commitments to engage in interreligious theological education that will provide effective strategy, knowledge, and skills for dialoguing across differences and divisions.

I also believe the GTU is uniquely equipped to offer religious responses to the challenges of sustainability. This could be the GTU's signature theme for its interreligious approach to studying religion and theology: to address environmental, economic, and social sustainability that affect the Earth and the human world in the twenty-first century. This quest for sustainability is something we all can participate in and support even if our primary research interests or teaching expertise might not fit under this theme. But for the GTU to

Make a planned gift today



***to empower the religious
scholars of tomorrow***

Become part of the GTU's Legacy Circle by leaving a bequest to the Graduate Theological Union in your will or living trust.

You can now make a tax-free gift from your IRA!

For more information about the GTU's Planned Giving program, please contact Dr. Alan Kelchner, Vice President for Advancement, at 510-649-2425 or akelchner@gtu.edu.

become recognized as a leader in theological research and education in sustainability, we will need a critical mass of interreligious thinkers (say about 25% of GTU faculty and students) whose primary academic interest is in engaging and responding to the challenges of sustainability.

It is not an overstatement to say that I am truly honored and humbled to be serving as Dean of the GTU, especially when I consider the intellectual giants who occupied this position before me. Sherman Johnson, John Dillenberger, and Claude Welch were before my time, but I know their work established the foundation upon which we still build today. Margaret Miles was Dean during my years as a student here on Holy Hill, but I didn't get to know her well. I regret that very much. But I have gotten to know former Deans Judith Berling and Arthur Holder over the last few months. Before my arrival here, we were in constant contact, and they graciously and wisely prepared me for the job that awaited me. I must say, I was completely caught off guard by Judith's effervescent personality. Based on her academic gravitas, I thought she'd be serious at all times. But her hearty laughter is contagious, and her sense of humor puts everyone at ease. *A delightful person, she is*, as Yoda would say. And Arthur exudes goodness and warmth like homemade bread. Next to him, I feel like Darth Vader. And I always thought I was a nice guy!

The scholarly achievements and reputations of past GTU Deans are extraordinary. I think it would be unfair to hold me—or anyone else for that matter—to the standards of scholarship and productivity previous Deans have set. However, it is fair to hold me to the highest standards of spiritual, intellectual, and moral integrity. That's what should be expected of leaders in theological education, unlike some other



Uriah Kim speaks with doctoral students at a forum in February.

professions where character and humanity are deemed unimportant as long as they “win” (whatever that means). I promise that I'll perform my duties and responsibilities with utmost attention and care, always striving for excellence, and will encourage and enable individuals around me to do the same. I'll do my very best to uphold and strengthen GTU's commitment to academic freedom and its pledge to create an institution that embraces inclusivity and diversity and fights for justice. We are living in a time when these values and principles need to be defended and promoted more than ever before. Institutions don't protect themselves. Everyone needs to do their part, and I promise I will do my very best to do mine.

To the students of the GTU: I look forward to supporting, encouraging, and empowering you to develop your own theological voices and to acquire and hone the knowledge, skills, and wisdom to make positive impact on your communities, the academy, and the larger world. Please stop by my office to say hello. I'll lift the window shades for you.

To the esteemed GTU faculty: It is truly an honor to be part of a group of scholars, teachers, and leaders who are united by a pas-

sion for knowledge and truth, a concern for the Earth and all its creatures, a love for God, and a commitment to teach, train, and mentor our students. I look forward to working with you all.

To all the friends and supporters of the GTU: We value your contributions to the well-being of the GTU and your involvement in the life of this community. With your support and friendship, the GTU will continue to be a leader in equipping religious scholars who engage the critical issues of our world.

To our GTU alumni: Please know that I am united with the rest of the GTU's faculty, staff, and trustees as we root for you, cheering you on to success and satisfaction in your career and work, and wishing you fulfillment and happiness in your life and community. Because, to borrow a line from fashion icon Vidal Sassoon, “If you don't look good, we don't look good.” When you do good, be good, and enable good, then the GTU looks great. Together, we can make GTU 2.0 even better and stronger, more compassionate and creative, and more inclusive and diverse than ever before!

Uriah Y. Kim (PhD, 2004) is the GTU's Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs.