

For Such a Time As This

With a steady hand and a clear vision, President Riess Potterveld has guided the GTU through five years of growth and transition.

by Arthur Holder

WHEN RIESS POTTERVELD BECAME ACTING PRESIDENT of the Graduate Theological Union in 2013, the public announcement said he would provide “stable leadership” while the Board of Trustees made plans to fill the position on a permanent basis. It is easy to see why he was chosen for that transitional role. This was to be his third presidency, coming after eight years at Lancaster Theological Seminary and three years at Pacific School of Religion, where some years before he had served as vice president for institutional advancement and acting dean. Clearly Riess was someone who knew the ropes in the administration of theological education!

Just as importantly, Riess knew the GTU. Through his two stints at PSR, he had already gained the confidence of GTU board members, including the presidents of the member schools. Here was someone who could be trusted to hold things steady while the institution figured out what to do next.

But it didn't turn out that way at all. Just a year later, in 2014, the Board of Trustees elected Riess as president, to universal acclaim. The various constituencies of the community on Holy Hill had quickly decided that Riess's vision of an expanded and energetically interreligious school was the way forward for the GTU. Throughout his five years at the helm of the institution, Riess has dedicated himself heart and soul to making that vision a reality. Some of the most obvious signs of the implementation of that vision are

the recently revised curriculum for MA and PhD students and a new look for GTU communications, including a new logo and tagline, a completely renovated website, and *Skylight* magazine.

While Riess likes to talk about the need to bring more religious traditions to the table in graduate education, he is also quick to remind people that interreligious cooperation has long been central to the GTU's core mission. The Center for Jewish Studies was established at the GTU in 1968, just six years after the school was founded. The Institute of Buddhist Studies became a GTU affiliate in 1985; the Center for Islamic Studies opened in 2007. The interreligious trajectory is clear, Riess has said. But can't we pick up the pace?

Just two years into Riess's tenure, the Center for Dharma Studies opened to promote the study of Hinduism, Jainism, and other Dharma traditions. Funding from local donors now supports courses in Sikh Studies and Mormon Studies. The Center for Swedenborgian Studies became a GTU affiliate in 2016.

The interreligious breadth of the GTU has expanded in additional ways during Riess's presidency. Acquisition of the Lanier Graham “Art of the World Religions” collection has brought more than three hundred works of sacred art to the GTU where they can be displayed in the library and eventually online in a digital museum. Active conversations are underway with the Institute of Buddhist Studies and Zaytuna College (the first Muslim liberal arts college in the



Reiss Potterveld congratulates a graduate at GTU commencement.

U. S.) about the possibility that these recently accredited schools may become member schools of the GTU.

Riess has also fostered the GTU's support for interdisciplinary scholarship. Thanks in large part to his hard work, both the Center for the Arts & Religion (CARE) and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS) have moved from affiliate status to become fully integrated GTU programs. The faculty and staff associated with these two centers are now key partners in the school's pursuit of its educational mission.

All of this institutional expansion and new programming costs money. With his extensive experience in fundraising, Riess has worked to grow the GTU's endowment from \$31 million in 2013 to over \$51 million today, with as much as another \$20 million currently in development. Under his leadership, the GTU secured the three largest single gifts in its history: \$4.4 million from Mira and Ajay Shingal to establish the Center for Dharma Studies that has been named for them, \$2 million from Francisco J. Ayala for the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences that now

bears his name, and \$5.7 million for student scholarships from the estate of long-time GTU supporters Robert and Kathryn Riddell.

Although Riess will be the first to say that many other people have contributed to every institutional success, his leadership has been essential. Whether meeting with a potential donor, brainstorming with students and faculty, or developing strategic directions with the board, Riess has that rare combination of gifts that allows him to be both a receptive listener and a creative originator of ideas. He is always eager to get started, but infinitely patient with the sustained efforts necessary to produce results.

Presidents of educational institutions are often called upon to offer a brief word at events like student orientation sessions, commencements, public lectures, conferences, and symposia. Those who have watched Riess in action on such occasions have come to appreciate him as a master of the art. In his customary low-key and unassuming manner, Riess will tell about something he saw or heard recently—an art exhibition, a conversation with a student or donor, a news item about the latest innovation in technology, or an

incident with one of his beloved grandchildren. Then he will make a connection to activities at the GTU by reporting on an endowment gift or a programmatic initiative that is building steam. Good things are happening here, Riess tells the audience, and the GTU is making a positive difference in the world. His hopeful enthusiasm makes you want to be part of the action.

In many ways Riess's accomplishments as president of the GTU reflect the principles of process theology, which was the subject of his doctoral dissertation: an emphasis on becoming over stasis, a belief in the benefits of pluralism and diversity, and a conviction that divine reality is always at work in the depth of human experience for the ultimate triumph of beauty and goodness. The Graduate Theological Union is fortunate to have had such a leader for such a time as this! ♦

Arthur Holder is professor of Christian Spirituality at the GTU and served as the school's dean and vice president for academic affairs from 2002 to 2016.

Please join the GTU Board of Trustees in honoring the remarkable legacy of Dr. Riess Potterveld by contributing to the

Potterveld Fund for Interreligious Education and Scholarship

Under the leadership of President Potterveld, who will retire on June 30, 2018, the Graduate Theological Union has become one of the premier institutions for interreligious theological education in North America. While the GTU has long been an innovative center for ecumenical and interfaith scholarship, the blossoming of the GTU as a hub of innovative interreligious dialogue and education during Dr. Potterveld's presidency has been extraordinary.

Please help the GTU celebrate Riess Potterveld's legacy and build on the foundation established under his leadership by making a gift to the Potterveld Fund for Interreligious Education and Scholarship.

Donate now at www.gtu.edu/potterveldfund.

Thank You for Joining Us!

For more about President Riess Potterveld's accomplishments, public events related to his retirement, and the Potterveld Fund for Interreligious Education and Scholarship, visit www.gtu.edu/potterveld-retirement.

Ancient Texts, Fresh Insights

Alumna of the Year Virginia Burrus brings the wisdom of the past to bear on today's challenges

When Dr. Virginia Burrus (MA, '84; PhD, '91) was a GTU student, she sought to help the school find ways to celebrate its unique nature as a hub of religious pluralism and scholarship. Along with other doctoral students, she advocated for the first GTU commencement ceremony. (Previously GTU graduates were recognized only at the commencements of member schools with which they affiliated.) She also encouraged the GTU to begin publicly honoring the good work its graduates were doing, which led to Dr. Margaret Miles being named the GTU's first alumna of the year in 1991.

Virginia Burrus never imagined she would accept the award she helped establish. "I never dreamed I'd be honored in this way," she reflected at the GTU alumni reception at the AAR-SBL Annual Meetings in November. "All kinds of things have come to pass that I couldn't have envisioned twenty-six years ago, including wonderful surprises like being named alumna of the year. So I am very grateful indeed."

Today, Virginia Burrus is the Bishop W. Earl Ledden Professor of Religion and director of graduate studies at Syracuse University in New York. She came to Syracuse in 2013, after more than two decades on the faculty at Drew University.

Throughout her scholarly career, Burrus has explored how ancient traditions speak to contemporary issues. "I've always tried to ask what these old texts might have to say to me, and to whatever concerns I bring to them. I try to hear new things. I'm not coming to the texts expecting to hear only patriarchy or dominion language, even though I take these critiques