



SAN FRANCISCO
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Whole Leaders for the Whole Church

105 Seminary Road
San Anselmo, CA 94960
415.451.2800
www.sfts.edu

SFTS Contact
Holly Woolard
Communications Manager
415-451-2823
hwoolard@sfts.edu

Clinical Pastoral Education Program honored at General Assembly

SAN ANSELMO, Calif., July 5 – San Francisco Theological Seminary is an innovator in Clinical Pastoral Education and the Presbyterian Association of Specialized Pastoral Ministries agrees wholeheartedly.

SFTS has earned the 2010 John Rea Thomas Award for excellence in the fields of pastoral care and counseling for its CPE program. SFTS Interim President Dr. Laird J. Stuart, Shaw Family Chair for CPE Laurie Garrett-Cobbina and John Shaw received the award on Monday, July 5, at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly in Minneapolis.

“There really isn’t another CPE program quite like ours,” Garrett-Cobbina said. “Our program directly links the academics of theological education with pastoral care to the community of believers. It really is a cutting-edge education opportunity.”

The award is named for one of the founding members of the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association. Thomas, whose ministries included military and hospital chaplaincy, fought for the recognition of ministers in specialized settings throughout his career.

A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and currently a PhD student at the Graduate Theological Union, Garrett-Cobbina was pastor of Smallwood Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, N.C., where she also served as ACPE faculty for the Carolinas HealthCare System from 2000-06. The ACPE supervisor, pastor and chaplain joined the SFTS faculty in 2006 as the Shaw Family Chair for CPE, the only endowed CPE chair in the nation.

“The wisdom of the Shaw family should be commended,” Garrett-Cobbina said. “They are not only investing in the Seminary, but in future leaders of the church.”

The CPE program at SFTS uses an action-reflection method of learning that focuses on developing professional identity and pastoral skills. Intense involvement with persons in need and feedback from peers and faculty help students develop new awareness of themselves as a pastor and person. The integration of personal awareness, theological reflection and academic foundations enhances their ability to provide pastoral care and counseling to those they serve.

What makes the SFTS program unique is that CPE is integrated into the SFTS curriculum. "When you have the scholars, the spirituality focus and the counseling focus that SFTS uniquely offers, it makes the learning in our CPE program very rich," Garrett-Cobbina said. "It makes it interdisciplinary in a whole new way."

Self-reflection is the starting point for all CPE students at SFTS. Self-reflection along with theological reflection on human situations leads to new understandings of ministry, self, others and God. Garrett-Cobbina believes pastors are much more prepared to meet the needs of others if they reflect on their own values, beliefs and assumptions.

Joseph Dai Nguyen, associate director of enrollment at SFTS, completed the CPE program at SFTS in 2009. He says the skills he developed have definitely made him a better listener as he helps prospective students discern their calls.

"CPE empowered me to be more present with prospective students who are in the process of life-changing decisions," Nguyen said. "It has helped me be confident in what I'm doing. It's important to be a good listener, more reflective, confirming what people are saying."

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San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) graduate school, has prepared leaders for the church since 1871. One of the founding members of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, it offers theological degrees, including Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry, at its campuses in San Anselmo and Pasadena. For more information please call SFTS at 1-800-447-8820 in San Anselmo or 1-800-473-8772 in Pasadena. Also find information online at www.sfts.edu.