

People of South Denver

Tom Wolfe

By Susan Dugan

While coming of age in upstate New York, Iliff School of Theology President and CEO Tom Wolfe set his sights on learning to fly rather than on following his father into the clergy. But during freshman year of aviation school, his vision changed.

"Alone with my thoughts, it became very clear that I wanted to head toward seminary," he says.

Wolfe transferred to Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where he majored in psychology and added a second major in religion the following year. He chose his next move carefully.

"As a kid I would come home from school and often have a group of clergy and a rabbi sitting around planning something," he explains. "I chose a theological school that would expose me across faith traditions."

He enrolled in the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, in 1978 and received a Master of Divinity degree in 1981.

"Going to the other coast was a whole different cultural experience and also very intentional on my part," he says.

After graduating, Wolfe relocated to Ithaca, New York, with his wife Marilyn (who he'd met in California), to be pastor of a United Methodist congregation surrounded by Cornell University.

"I had a very intelligent congregation," he says. "They scared the heck out of me, but I had a very important, scary-bright scientist in my congregation that the White House consulted with. I remember him knocking on my door saying, 'you know I have all this power but my life is a wreck. Can I come and talk with you?' And I realized I didn't have to be as smart as them, I just had to be in a pastoral relationship with them."

Wolfe's next assignment landed him in a large rural congregation in Moravia, New York, where he served for six years before facing reassignment.

"I could either go to the big-steeple church or the Protestant chaplaincy at Syracuse University," he explains. "The chaplaincy was kind of run down, but my gut said yes, so I went and built that program and realized I really liked higher education. One of my board members also on the faculty sent me down to meet the director of the Higher Education Administration Program."

Wolfe found the program's multidisciplinary approach a perfect fit for his diverse interests and, after earning his Ph.D., he served as dean of the Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University for the next 10 years.

"There was all the diverse religious life that I was comfortable with, and I also got to build relationships with the community and sharpen my awareness of the institutions in our neighborhoods," he says.

Wolfe then served as senior vice president and dean of Student Affairs at Syracuse for the next five years.



Iliff School of Theology President and CEO Tom Wolfe entered college with aspirations to become a pilot rather than follow his father into the clergy. Things soon changed. Photo by Sara Hertwig.

"The Chancellor wanted me to heal a division that was pretty broken," he explains. "People needed to fall in love with their work again and feel trusted and included."

Encouraged by the United Methodist denomination and colleagues, Wolfe began to explore seeking the presidency of a theological school.

"I was nicely tucked in but something about it intrigued me," he says. "I began to look for a good fit and found it at Iliff (where he was named president in August 2013). This job incorporates everything I've ever done. The parts of me that are pastoral, the parts that are administrative and the parts that place students at the center of my mindset all get played out here. We're all interested in the future of theological education and in making sure we prepare our people to fully engage in the world."

A world, Wolfe acknowledges, that looks completely different than it did in 1981.

"The trick is not to get stuck in your own past and to think in whole new ways while honoring Iliff's deep, progressive, theological history that has made a really powerful statement for justice and produced so many courageous people," he says. "It has everything to do with how we structure theological education, how

we frame our curriculum, what needs to take place in the classroom and how we place our interns."

The school is in the midst of change, Wolfe believes.

"A lot of our students are going into struggling institutions," he says. "How do we equip them with the tools to name and understand the issues? To not project them into some old model, but move them into what really needs to happen? Some of that horizon is clear and a lot isn't. If we're living our lives honestly, we say it's not clear. That puts us in a stronger position to find our way into the future. There's a lot of flux now but we're friends with that, otherwise you're in battle with it and that doesn't work."

As part of a larger world fraught with divisiveness and exclusiveness, Iliff's approach to theological education continues to offer an alternative.

"We are a place that enrolls people of all faith traditions," Wolfe says. "Our United Methodist history carries with it a solid commitment to inclusiveness. We've never protected our borders from other faith traditions. We also are absolutely committed to academic freedom. I sometimes remind the church that academic freedom and the spirit of inclusion

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were gifts of the church, not something the institutions invented for themselves. There's sometimes a creative tension between the church and the institutions that serve it, and that's wonderful."

While considering the school's overall direction, Wolfe takes a very hands-on approach.

"Marilyn and I have students over in small groups," he says. "I cruise the hall and converse with them daily. Some have no denominational affiliation; some have no particular religious affiliation. When you ask them what they are doing here, they say it's because in this progressive place that is so committed to social justice, they know they'll have an opportunity to engage in true moral discourse."

Fostering that environment requires offering broad experiences.

"We don't hold one tradition superior to another, and we teach theology from a very deconstructed and post-colonial perspective," Wolfe says. "We are

also deeply committed to social justice, including LGBT rights and racial issues. We have a course being taught right now on Black Lives Matters. Our students come prepared to work with everybody."

Iliff demonstrates its values within the greater Denver community.

"We are sending students into the community all the time," he says. "We try to be good stewards of the resources given us and our primary resource is people. One of our strategic planning goals has been to engage in community partnerships that bring people in and let them know they are welcome. Right after Columbus Day, for example, we brought members of the community in to talk about Native American justice issues. We've conducted dialogue experiences with the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado and the Colorado Council of Churches."

Next year, as part of its 125th anniversary celebration, Iliff is planning a joint venture with Riverside Church in New York, commemorating the 50th

anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beyond Vietnam" speech.

"Dr. Vincent Harding, who drafted that speech, was on our faculty for several years and died during my first year here," Wolfe says. "NPR called when they were reporting on him and I pulled his book off the shelf and gave them the speech reference. I also called the senior minister at Riverside and we agreed to join together to commemorate that speech. So, on its 50th anniversary [April 4, 2017], representatives from Iliff will be at Riverside in New York, along with Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*, looking at issues raised in that speech that are still so relevant."

Wolfe likes to think that Iliff is creating a cadre of people with what he calls "courageous theological imaginations."

"Courageous speaks for itself, theological is what we do and imagination tells the story that we really don't need people coming out of here with predictable responses," he says. "We need people who are critically aware and engaged to see through issues, people who can really

move and organize. We have this heart for justice and aligning ourselves in a way that enables our students to make a difference in transforming the world."

Author Susan Dugan's wide range of work includes newspaper and magazine articles, personal essays and fiction. An active volunteer in local schools, she has taught creative writing and brought authors into classrooms. If you know a member of our community who is contributing in extraordinary ways and might make a good subject for this column, email Susan at sadugan@gmail.com.

