People of South Denver

By Susan Dugan

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

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

Wolfe transferred to Elon 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 clerg and a child 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 graduation, Wolfe relocated to Ithaca, New York, with his wife Marilyn (who he 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 have all this power but my life is a waste. Can I come and talk with you?' And I realized I didn't have to be as serious 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 Morris, New York, where he served six years before facing reappointment.

"I could either go to the big-steeple church or the Protestant chapel at Syracuse University," he explains. "The chapel was kind of run down, but my get up and 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 Hendrick Chapel at Syracuse University for the next 10 years.

"This was all the diverse religious life that I was comfortable with, and I also get to build relationships with the community and sharpen my understanding of the diverse life in our neighborhoods," he says.

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

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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 halls and encounter students and there 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 bread 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." Wolfe 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 learn 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 120th anniversary celebration, EIU 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. "We 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 went to join together to commemorate that speech. So, on its 50th anniversary (April 4, 2017), representatives from EIU 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 EIU is creating a cadre of people with whom 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 writers 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.

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