Remarks by The Rev. Dan Anderson-Little on the Occasion of the Awarding of the Distinguished Alumnus Award to The Rev. G. Daniel Little by McCormick Theological Seminary

October 30, 2009

President Campbell, Board members, faculty and staff, students, alumni and friends, I thank God for the opportunity to be with you on this auspicious occasion. On behalf of my father, who if not for his illness would be here addressing you today, I want to thank McCormick Seminary, an institution of learning and transformation that has played a key role in my family’s life for nearly 150 years. I also want to thank the Seminary for bringing the Distinguished Alumnus ceremony to Madison this June so my Dad could receive this honor and the love of the Seminary in person. Dan Little has served this community in so many ways over his years of ministry and you have served him equally well. I bring you his greetings and good wishes.

As I begin these remarks this afternoon, I want to point out one important difference between my father and me. There are not many ways in which my life and ministry have eclipsed my father, but there is one significant way that I supersede him, and I think it bears mentioning. While he is merely a fifth generation Presbyterian minister, I, on the other hand, am a sixth generation Presbyterian minister. When people ask me how so many ministers can come from one family, I am always taken back to the book of Exodus where we read that the sins of the father shall be visited on the third and fourth, and in my case sixth generation. I just pray that God will have mercy on my children!

I want to take as my point of departure the first two verses of the twelfth chapter of Romans where the Apostle Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God: what is good and acceptable and perfect.” If ever there were a passage of scripture that framed the life and ministry of Dan Little, it is these two verses. Of all of my father’s inestimable talents and characteristics, it is the clarity and precision and breadth of his mind that stand above all of the rest. He truly was and continues to be, even in the midst of battling brain cancer, a man of the mind. But he is not just a man of the mind; he is a man who has dedicated himself, in the words of the Apostle, to being transformed by the renewing of his mind. He has not been on a lifelong quest simply to gain knowledge or to convince himself of what he already knew to be true; rather he has constantly sought new ways to think, new ways to see what is possible, new ways to apprehend, appreciate, and live into God’s truth.

This love and commitment to being transformed through the renewing of his mind was certainly passed along with the family DNA that produced so many pastors. I have significant memories of my Grandfather (one of the few Littles who did not have the good sense to go to McCormick (he attended an East Coast seminary that shall remain
nameless). I have memories of him well into his nineties ruminating on deep and profound issues: the historical particularity of the Incarnation, the human struggle to engage in the kind of love that are described in I Corinthians 13. So my father comes by this honestly. His love of learning and renewing his mind was encouraged by the church that raised him. But I do believe that this quality and commitment of his was given new impetus and new direction in his time at McCormick. Dad was a part of McCormick Seminary’s Urban Ministry Program which was not content to teach only facts about the urban poor, the working class and racial/ethnic groups that populated Chicago and America’s cities in the 1950’s. Instead, McCormick sent him and his classmates out to live and work in those communities, to open their minds so that the people in those communities, the day laborers and maids, the factory and steel mill workers might become their teachers. Talk about the renewing of your mind! Anyone who has ever served in a cross-cultural context (and which of us in the 21st Century does not work in a cross-cultural context?!) knows that this is no easy thing. We must leave the comfortable and the comforting and allow ourselves to be remade or as Paul puts it, to be transformed. To live and grow successfully in such a setting requires that on the one hand we hold fast to what we know (we are no good to anyone if we forget who we are), but that on the other hand we open ourselves up to new ways of understanding, new values, new forms of expression, and new ways to see the world. Wherever God called him in ministry, this is what my father sought to do; whether he was serving an inner-city parish in London, England, a multi-racial congregation in Pittsburgh, the national church, or this seminary. Such a life requires great curiosity and mental ability, but it also requires great humility and faith.

But lest we think that Paul, in Romans, is just talking about a major head trip (and we Presbyterians know a thing or two about being on a head trip!), let me read that passage again: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God; what is good and acceptable and perfect. Paul, in this passage, not only encourages us to engage and renew our minds, but Paul implicates our bodies as well. We are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Paul knows what so much of Western Christianity has forgotten: that we who are created in the image of God are both mind and body. We do not only serve God with our minds, as important as our minds are. But we also serve by putting ourselves, our bodies on the line--by working with, living with, laughing with, crying with, singing with, dancing with, and eating with others. There are many ways that we can fulfill this call to present our bodies as our spiritual worship. In addition to the physicality of urban ministry and every place where he served, my father largely lived this out through his great love of the arts, both the appreciation of and practice of the arts. (In case you didn’t know in addition to his many ministerial and administrative talents, my father is a gifted singer, actor, painter and woodcarver.) The arts touch us so deeply because they push us beyond the rational, beyond the cognitive; they engage our senses and require that we be in motion. I defy anyone to listen to either Bach or gospel music and not move!
McCormick Seminary has played and must continue to play a vital role in helping its students maintain that vital mind-body connection. Good exegesis, profound theology steeped in spiritual practices and informed by church history, and pastoral sensitivity come alive in good preaching and good singing and good liturgy and good outreach. Prophetic witness gains traction as people find the courage to think for themselves and speak for themselves, to protest, to go on strike, to march, and to go to jail. My reading of the generations that are coming of age in the 21st Century tells me that young people today are desperately seeking faith traditions that not only have intellectual integrity, but that are real and sensual and make an actual difference in their lives, in the life of their community and in the life of the world.

What I am describing is what seminaries do by definition; that is why my father speaks of his time as your Interim President as some of the most engaging and fulfilling years of his ministry; you and he fed off of each other, you were in mission together. My father suggested that McCormick had been doing this for its entire existence when he entitled his history of the McCormick “The Seminary the Reinvents Itself.” But just because we know what we are supposed to do and just because we have done it in the past, doesn’t mean that we will necessarily do it all that well in the future.

The church and its institutions live in a constant tension between its past and its future, between tradition and innovation, between being already reformed and always reforming. In order to be a church or a seminary for this current generation and generations yet unborn, we must recommit ourselves to presenting our bodies as living sacrifices and we must allow God’s Holy and Life-Giving Spirit to transform us by the renewing of our minds. This means we will never have the contentment of having it figured out, of having arrived, of crafting the perfect curriculum or the best way to understand God and the world. We and this seminary will always be works in progress, trusting that God will transform us as we present ourselves body and mind. This is what Dan Little has sought to do in his life and ministry, and so many of us here and so many of us associated with this seminary are blessed because he was relentless in this pursuit. As we are invited to march into God’s future, we can do no less.