

MEET PTS



DEAN OF STUDENTS JOHN WELCH EXEMPLIFIES PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

When John Welch '02 ran for mayor of Pittsburgh last year, he did it not because he expected to win the bid but to “move the needle” on issues he felt weren’t getting enough attention—particularly, the issue of housing in the increasingly gentrified parts of the city that were being overlooked. His strategy and purpose had broad support from the Pittsburgh Seminary community both on and off campus. And move the needle he did.

“My calling was to a ‘politics of disruption’—disruption to the system and the status quo,” he says. “It was the first time I’d put my faith into action as a political candidate, and the experience convinced me that more people of faith need to get involved politically—through engagement, running for office, what have you. As a dean of students, I’ve long believed my position to be one of exemplifying practical theology.”

For four years the Rev. Dr. Welch, vice president for student services and community engagement and dean of students, had served as a mayoral appointee on the Sports and Exhibition Authority, so he was very familiar with the decisions being made about what percentage of the 28 city acres overseen by the Authority (formerly the Civic Arena site) were being allocated for affordable housing. Also long-active in leadership for Bidwell Street United Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network, and Pittsburgh’s Bureau of Police Chaplaincy Corps, John is keenly aware of the problems of urban poverty here, despite Pittsburgh’s having been repeatedly named America’s most livable city.

“I felt called to enter the race,” notes John. “That’s different from expecting that I’d become mayor. My calling was to a ‘politics of disruption’—disruption to the system and the status quo,” he says. “It was the first time I’d put my faith into action as a political candidate, and the experience convinced me that more people of faith need to get involved politically—through engagement, running for office, what have you. As a dean of students, I’ve long believed my position to be one of exemplifying practical theology.”

During John’s campaign, he intentionally and strategically campaigned in areas of Pittsburgh that were neglected—that were “outside the mayor’s sweet spot.” “My biggest concern was that Pittsburgh—my hometown, where I’d seen the displacement of urban neighborhoods before—was becoming two Pittsburghs: one made up of people who’ve grown up here, and one made up of people who’ve moved in to take advantage of Pittsburgh’s growth. Many of those in the first group—those who’ve gone through tough times here, who’ve been here a long time—can no longer afford to live in the areas they call home.”

One of the avenues through which John continues to “move the needle” on the issue of affordable housing in Pittsburgh is through the newly formed Village Collaborative of East Liberty, an idea of City Councilman the Rev. Ricky Burgess. John, in addition to fellow PTS vice president Dr. Jim Downey, have joined this table, which includes clergy from a number of East Liberty churches, East Liberty Development Inc., and neighborhood residents to serve as a “clearing house” where developers must present their plans and allow community members an opportunity to provide input. “The perception of the community is that things are happening in their neighborhood—including the displacement of people—about which they have no say. For Pittsburgh Seminary to be a good citizen in this city, we must show active care for our neighbors and hold ourselves accountable regarding the plans we develop for our own ‘plot of ground’ here in East Liberty,” John reflects.

One way Pittsburgh Seminary is caring for our community is by offering affordable housing to local residents displaced by renovations in the neighborhood. Working with ELDI, Pittsburgh Seminary is making eight apartments available on campus for up to two years to residents as they await construction completion. In this way, Pittsburgh Seminary seeks to be a generous and hospitable community of Christ.

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