

PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP STUDIES SUFFERING



The Rev. Dr. Heather Vacek is curious—especially about how theological beliefs shape reactions to intractable suffering, such as that caused by chronic illness, war, poverty, and oppression. As a church historian, she's been exploring that topic as part of a summer research fellowship from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, based in Crawfordsville, Ind. The five-week fellowship follows Heather's participation as a member of the 2013-14 Workshop for Pre-Tenure Theological School faculty.

Dr. Vacek's fellowship project, titled "Does Suffering Matter? Integrating Historical Insight about Christian Conceptions of Suffering into the Seminary Curriculum," builds on her forthcoming book, which provides a history and theology of mental illness in American Protestant experience from the colonial era through the twentieth

century. "Given the centrality of my scholarly interest in suffering and Christian attention/inattention to it, this project challenges me to consider where and why it could be more deeply integrated into my own teaching," Heather comments. The research opportunity supports her integration of perceptions of suffering into her current core courses, as well as her development of a new course: Suffering and Hope in the Christian Tradition.

Why is it important to do so? In her fellowship proposal Heather explains: "A recent letter to the editor in *The Christian Century* asserted, 'People are drawn to communities that know how to suffer together,' yet it seems few seminarians, pastors, or congregations feel at ease articulating theological understandings of suffering. Despite inattention in seminary curricula, it is difficult to imagine a ministry unaffected by some form of human distress." Through her research and teaching, she seeks to equip future clergy with more robust theologies of suffering and with the ability to shape communities that attend to suffering.

Heather's work in church history and theology stems from her desire to "discover, document, and share the historical shape of Christian thought and practice in order to enable reflection about faithful Christian practice for the present and the future." Besides integrating her fellowship research into her classroom teaching, Heather is also laying the groundwork for her next book project—a history of conceptions of suffering in American Protestantism.

"The programs and fellowship opportunities at the Wabash Center offer tremendous resources for faculty who care deeply about the intersections of scholarship, teaching, and vocation," notes Heather. By allowing her time to "consider how attention to suffering and hope in the Christian tradition might shape the ongoing work of participating in God's mission in the world," Heather's fellowship is helping her serve the ongoing, faithful witness of the Church—in large part by expanding her students' theological horizons.

This summer another PTS faculty member, assistant professor of homiletics the Rev. Dr. Lisa Thompson, traveled to the Wabash Center to begin her participation as a member of the 2014-15 Workshop for Pre-Tenure Theological School faculty.



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