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Boardwalks and Beaches, Boundaries and Givens

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The image of the beach environment displays its givens: sand, sea, sky, dunes, plants, even the unseen particles in the air. The image of the boardwalk and “private property” sign shows a (passable) boundary onto which one can walk to the beach. It provides narrow, bounded access to a more open, free beach space. In times of change, the academic dean must understand the givens and the boundaries of theological education.

Givens are the physical (temporal) and ontological realities that give boundary (like the narrow boardwalk) and freedom (like the open beach) to the work of the dean. As deans of theological schools, theological givens ought to be primary. As the beach becomes something else without sand, sea, and sky, the theological school becomes something else without a certain set of theological givens, and their relationship to other realities. Theological convictions and commitments rooted in texts and traditions, and how they cohere, serve as the sand, sea, and sky of the theological school environment. Other givens--cultural, social, institutional, etc.--will inform each dean’s context. The theological givens, I think, order and prioritize the other givens. The dean must know and value the givens in order to understand and carry out her role as an academic leader.

Boundaries show the dean the context and scope of her work. They also indicate lines that either ought not or should be crossed. At times, the dean must help faculty, staff, and students flourish within a certain boundary, whether institutional, cultural, social or others. Other times, the dean must help faculty, staff, and students break through boundaries such as an antiquated and disparate curriculum. Curriculum revision offers one example where the academic dean leads the school to define new boundaries. These new academic boundaries will resonate if they reflect the givens of the school, like the boardwalk “fits” the beach environment because of how it helps us access and enjoy the beach.

Academic leadership necessitates clear vision and creative discovery of the proper path for the people of the theological school. The givens and the boundaries of the school give the dean a context and lenses for that vision. When changes to theological education come, as they always have, a clear vision enables the dean to see his or her way forward so that the faculty, students, staff, and other constituents of the school may confidently follow, even if the future is unclear.

<https://wabash.center/2018/05/boardwalks-and-beaches-boundaries-and-givens/>