

# HEAD LINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School

October 18, 2018

Dear Trinity Community,

When Desirée and I walked 800 kilometers of the Camino in the fall of 2016, the first steps we took made all the difference. We emerged from our albergue in St. Jean Pied de Port on the French-Spanish border, turned left, and headed downhill toward Santiago de Compostela on the far side of Spain. Every step we took for the next 37 days was determined, in some way, by those first steps. And every step we took confirmed those first steps.

When the founders of Trinity stepped out into the educational landscape in 1995, to start a new school in rented space at a church on Erwin Road, they set a course for the life of the school that continues to this day. The direction they set cannot be charted on a compass, but it had a goal and a trajectory every bit as determinative as our course through northern Spain.

I would like to chart that course for us here, for it continues to direct the school in important ways. Unless the Board decides to make a reverse course as radical as backtracking the Camino, this is the journey that we all will continue to pursue together.

The first direction was to be a Christian school. There were other possibilities: We could have been a secular independent school with some Christians as founders; we could have been a school in the Judeo-Christian tradition; or we could have been a school that attempted some civil religious pluralism. We chose, deliberately, to be a Christian school with a “big C,” as we like to say, unapologetically evangelical and orthodox in its Christian commitment. Maintaining this commitment requires wisdom and vigilance. The Board of Trinity is keenly aware that the trend in institutions is not to suddenly reverse and head in the opposite direction, but to gently wander off course—like pilgrims who veer off slightly enough but over time end up in Portugal and not in Santiago. The name for that wandering is “mission drift,” and the Board spends a good bit of energy thinking about how we can prevent this as a school. It’s not easy, because times change, issues wax and wane, and different generations have different priorities. How does the middle of our journey look different from the beginning, but stay headed in the same direction?

It’s not hard to find a Christian school grounded in evangelical orthodoxy, especially in the Southeast. It’s harder still to find such a Christian school that is committed to an ecumenical mission. That is the second directional move that the Board made early on. Trinity’s founders aspired to create a school that would burst the bounds of one particular Christian tradition and bring Christians together across the kinds of divides that they have often drawn for themselves or inherited. Trinity’s ecumenical DNA is often misunderstood, as though we were going for something “without boundaries.” But that is not a biblical vision for the wideness of the worldwide church, nor is it even practicable to run a school without boundaries. Rather, the boundaries

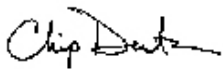
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that we have set for the school are as theologically wide as our Trinitarian theology will allow and as our orthodox and evangelical faith will support. The church has not often been Exhibit A for Jesus' lofty vision of unity in John 17 ("that they might be one as we are one"). But Trinity School has found a way to live out that truth in powerful ways. In fact, I would say that this is one of the most important and distinctive apologetics for a school like Trinity. Why Trinity? Because without it the unity of the body of Christ in Durham and Chapel Hill is diminished.

There is one other first step that the founders made, one that continues to point Trinity in a certain direction today. We decided early on that parents and students did not need to be professing Christians to be part of the school community. The technical term for this kind of school is noncovenant. Trinity has always been open to the community, to anyone who wishes to come. Combined with our ecumenical commitment, this noncovenantal stance promotes a diversity that is uncommon among Christian schools. We aspire to live out this diversity as a noncovenantal Christian school: We ask all our families, whether Christian or not, to respect and support our school policies, many of which are formed in line with the Gospel of Christ. We are not shy about wanting the Christian Good News to seep into the hearts and minds of all our families, especially those who come to us without Christian faith. But we are also committed to offering an excellent education to every Trinity student, regardless of faith commitment.

A school's commitments are demonstrated in its boundary decisions, and we can map Trinity's direction if we look at things like hiring and admission. With respect to our Christian identity, we hire only Christ-followers as teachers. There have been times, particularly in the earlier years of the school, when the urgent need to hire a teacher has put enormous pressure on us, but we have tried to stay true to this commitment—and our parents will attest to the faithful cloud of witnesses that have walked the halls of Trinity. Likewise, our ecumenical commitment is embodied in our hiring practices. Early on, the Board endorsed the hiring of our first Roman Catholic teacher—a move not common among Christian schools founded by Protestant believers. But we are excited about the vision of a faculty bringing together those of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian faith. Conversely, we would not hire a teacher who could not affirm our Trinitarian faith or our broadly evangelical statement of faith (taken with permission from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship). Our ecumenism is a Trinitarian, Christ-honoring ecumenism. Finally, our noncovenant commitment has led us to adopt a nondiscriminatory stance on admission. We have had Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish students, and we have many families who would identify as "Nones" on a religious survey. All of these students and families make our school richer, and we welcome them all.

Who of us has not wondered and worried about how to navigate our increasingly diverse and divisive world? Could it be that a school like Trinity, with a clear, strong center but wide margins, windows, and doors, might be able to form a thick community that thrives in the midst of the challenge? I hope so. I thank God that he guided our first steps, and I pray he will whisper in our ears as we take our next ones: "This is the way, walk in it."



Chip Denton  
Head of School

## TRINITY SCHOOL OF DURHAM AND CHAPEL HILL

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