

# From the Dean

## The Offering of a New Song

As we enter another academic year, I am moved to reflect on the ways the Divinity School that we all share both continues the traditions of the past and strives to implement new ideas while remaining faithful to those traditions. One year ago, we began with a convocation recognizing the fiftieth anniversary of the matriculation of Joseph Andrew Johnson Jr., Vanderbilt University's first African-American student. The University was already three-quarters of a century into its life when that admission took place. The School of Religion broke with tradition and thereby gained a fuller measure of its soul.

It was upon this theme of balancing tradition with the need to introduce perspectives that I charged our recent graduates at the end of the 2003-2004 school year. As alumni/ae of the school, you have discovered, as they will, that half of what your professors tried to teach you may be safely forgotten, but upon the other half you will stake your lives. The key to living a faithful life in ministry—whatever form that ministry may

take—is choosing well between ageless, life-changing wisdom and those ideas and practices that have only passing value. I told the graduates that this important work of choosing well amounts to balancing the Apostle Paul's words, "Hold fast to what is good" and the Psalmist's command, "Sing to the Lord a new song."

Vanderbilt University Divinity School has long styled itself as a School of the Prophets, a *Schola Prophetarum*. I think this is a marvelously apropos metaphor for a place that seeks to equip people for a still-unfolding world. Prophets are the jazz artists of religion. Priests are like well-rehearsed choirs singing the same music beautifully the same way each performance. The prophets, on the other hand sometimes sing the wailing lament of justice denied. Sometimes they toss off a lighter tune of joy in being alive. Sometimes they sing the blues of how hard it is to persevere in the faith. And sometimes they sing the ecstatic shout of hope achieved. No matter the mood of the religious jazz the prophets sing, they always offer a new song



Dean James Hudnut-Beumler

that extends the received tradition so that the word needed now is offered.

As we look around the world today, we see plenty of new occasions to embrace the best in what our forbearers tried to teach us and to sing new songs. When we see our sons and daughters turned into torturers instead of liberators, it is time to sing a new song. In our churches when we see the tradition being used as a tool of oppression and exclusion against others, it is time to sing a new song. When the old songs we are singing in worship no longer bring us closer to God, it is time to sing a new song. What new songs will the graduates of 2004 sing as life-long representatives of the School of the Prophets? What new songs are still in you and me? I do not know, but I am glad to be associated with a School that holds fast to what is good—not everything in the tradition mind you, but that which is good—and lives to sing a new song to the Lord.

We began our year celebrating a mutual admissions decision that turned out exceedingly well. A remarkable student went on to become a gifted and faithful leader as a bishop in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. We ended the year with a large graduating class of remarkable people venturing out in faith and hope. And as a faculty and staff at the Divinity School, we look forward to helping prepare more "jazz artists" who will offer their songs to a waiting, hurting, hoping world.