Paul and Ruth Few: A Column for Tithing



In the household where Paul Few grew up, his parents kept track of what they spent. Groceries, gas, the ordinary arithmetic of a family budget, with one column set aside for the tithe.

It was not presented as a stretch goal. It was the floor. Paul says the idea of the tithe as a minimum has been part of him since he was young enough to watch his parents do the accounting, and it has remained throughout his life.

Ruth Few learned the same lesson from a different direction. Her family talked about the least of these. About the people without the resources they needed, and what the family owed them. Between the two households, this habit was twice formed.

Six decades later, Phillips Theological Seminary is among the beneficiaries of this dedication to generous giving.

Ruth and Paul each came to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) through people who preceded them.

Ruth's connection runs the deepest. Her great-great-great grandfather was a circuit rider in Kentucky, riding a route to congregations that had no settled minister. She was dedicated and baptized at Central Christian Church in Iowa. Paul came to the Disciples in Missouri, at Raytown Christian Church, where he was active for years and eventually served as deacon and elder at several congregations.

The couple now lives in Nebraska, and their denominational thread has held strong throughout their life together.

Phillips entered the picture for the Fews when Bill Tabbernee, then the seminary's president, asked Paul to join the Board of Trustees.

What Ruth remembers about those years is not only governance. She went along to the meetings, and what she found was a community of trustees, faculty, and staff who became people she knew rather than names on an agenda.

Two special encounters from that time remain with her and with Paul.

At one of the board dinners, Ruth fell into conversation with a man who was about her own height, unassuming, easy to talk to. It took her a while to realize she was talking with Fred Craddock, arguably the most influential preacher the Disciples produced in the 20th century, and a man who evidently saw no reason to mention it at dinner.

Paul tells a version of the same story about Chester Cadieux. The QuikTrip co-founder and his company gave Phillips the building that became its Tulsa campus, and the way he explained the

decision was that he could think of no better use for it than a seminary. No flourish. No accolades. Just the simple sentence.

Those two moments are a summary of what has kept the Fews attached to Phillips through the decades: consequential people behaving as though they were servants. The Fews are also specific about what they continue to support and why they are Legacy Partners of the seminary.

They believe clergy should be educated, and they have stayed interested in the range of ways Phillips makes that possible, including the Certificate in Pastoral Ministry through the Center for Ministry and Lay Training, which prepares people who will serve smaller congregations. The Fews are attentive to who will serve the churches that a degree program alone would never reach.

They also pay attention to stewardship. At a moment when a good many seminaries are struggling, they say Phillips uses its resources well. This, in its way, reflects the tithing column. Money that has been carefully accounted for should go somewhere it will be carefully accounted for.

Their hope is that others will join them in supporting the seminary's work of developing leaders. Their encouragement comes from examples of continued commitment in their own lives, and it is what they were each taught through the example of their faithful families, to have a heart of generosity.

