

MEET PTS



WRITING CENTER DIRECTOR SHAN OVERTON MODELS LESSONS FOR STUDENTS

A writing professor as well as practitioner, Dr. Shan Overton has her fingers in a lot of literary pies. As PTS's director of the **Center for Writing and Learning Support**, she works with students at all levels of our academic programs. And to keep herself attuned to the uncomfortable feelings her students often have about learning the "how-to's" of theological writing—an area of skilled accomplishment for Shan—she purposely puts herself in writing territory that's uncomfortable for her. "As a person who teaches writing, I believe I need to model what I'm asking my students to do," she explains.

Currently that uneasiness for Shan comes from the poetry-writing classes she takes in Carlow University's Madwomen in the Attic program, begun in 1979 by women writers as an outlet for women's voices and a way to connect the university and the community. Now in her third semester of courses in this nationally known group, Shan says the experience has made her take some new risks with her writing. And intensifying the riskiness is the fact that four of her poems per semester get "worked over" by her classmates for at least half an hour. "All that I myself can do is sit, listen, and take notes! I'm used to academic writing, but for me writing poetry and sharing it with other people feels rather terrifying. Because poetry is very compact, writing it invites you to be deliberate about what you put down on paper. The experience has made me think more carefully about how I communicate, both in writing and speaking." And Shan has challenged herself further by participating in outside poetry readings and by publishing one of her poems in last year's Voices from the Attic anthology.

In October, Shan tackled another new experience as she traveled to Singapore to give writing lectures and workshops at Trinity Theological College, which hosted the Association for Theological Education of South East Asia's Seminar for Writers. Invited there through ATESEA board member and 2018-2019 PTS Visiting Scholar Dr. Joas Adiprasetya, Shan gave instruction to scholars and faculty from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Philippines, Thailand, and Taiwan on what it means to write in a second, third, fourth, or other language (for the participants, English) for an audience outside one's home context. She addressed why doing so is important, how to frame the message, and also the complexity of leaving the writer's home audience behind when using vocabulary, images, themes, and references unfamiliar and inaccessible to them.

"It's vital to be deliberate in making your decisions as a writer, including where and how you publish your work. Right now, reaching the largest global audience means writing in English," Shan notes, "and the church in the Global North needs to hear what the church in the Global South has to say. Hearing others' voices can give us insights we otherwise may miss."

Here on campus, Shan also gives writing guidance to D.Min. students as a faculty mentor for the Parish Focus. In January, she taught workshops on topics such as incorporating and citing sources to help students think about how to engage in a theological conversation in a paper. "Most often, pastors in the **D.Min. program** don't have to do the same kind of work for sermons that they have to do for writing doctoral level papers and dissertations, so I participate in helping them develop an additional set of skills—skills that give them a wider repertoire for communicating their insights both in their own faith contexts and churches as well as in publications for audiences they haven't yet considered. We're broadening their horizons for communicating the message they understand as the work God has given them to do from the pulpit."

An important skill Shan not only teaches but also practices is "being your own best first reader." She explains, "Once you've got your material down on paper, it's no longer just yours, because you're writing for various publics. So how do you relate to what you yourself have written? It's crucial to be thoughtful about your own writing. If you don't shepherd it well and treat it appropriately, you're not doing what you've been called to do in sharing your message with those who encounter it."

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