

Aberdeen's Dean Becomes Princeton's President

Princeton Seminary Welcomes Iain Torrance

by Barbara A. Chaapel

Just days after Iain Torrance was elected by Princeton Seminary's Board of Trustees and introduced to the faculty and staff on campus, he was sitting, laptop in hand, in an internet cubicle in the Amsterdam airport awaiting a flight to China. The trip would be his last official visit as moderator of the Church of Scotland.

Checking his email, he opened one from Setri Nyomi, the general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a Princeton alum from Ghana, and a friend. The email message congratulated Torrance on his call as Princeton's sixth president. Torrance immediately emailed back, turned off his computer, and stood to leave the cubicle. At the same time, a traveler two cubicles away also closed *his* laptop and stood. It was Setri Nyomi!

The anecdote, which Torrance recounts with a twinkle in his eye, tells a lot about the man who is Princeton's new president. He uses computers with ease and understands the value of the internet for communication and connection. He is at home in the world beyond his native Scotland. He experiences and embraces a worldwide Christian church. He calls people from diverse cultures and nations friends. He works hard and understands the stewardship of time. And not least, he has a delightful sense of humor.

It was these and many other characteristics and experiences that led the board's search committee to Torrance. "We didn't really know who he was when we received a letter recommending that we consider him," says Mary Lee Fitzgerald, cochair of the committee. "But we contacted him, interviewed him, a few of us even went to hear him preach in a small church in Scotland," she says. "Among other things, he preached a children's sermon that Sunday. I remember thinking how authentic he was, what a good listener, what a good teacher and communicator. I felt closer to him every time I met him. I think many of us on the committee felt that way."

For his part, Iain Torrance says he wasn't seeking to leave Aberdeen (where he was dean of the Faculty of Arts and Divinity); in fact, after a year as moderator of the Church of Scotland he looked forward to returning to teaching and administration in the academy. What he didn't realize was that it would be in Princeton.

"Princeton's presidency was not something I sought," he says. "It came out of the blue. When the committee first approached me, I thought and prayed about it, and talked with my wife, Morag, and said yes, if they wanted to consider me, I would be open. I felt that if I were chosen, or if I were not chosen, I would accept the decision as being God's word to me. So, here I am."

Torrance spent the days just before he took office on July 1 at the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Richmond, Virginia. There he spoke to and was confirmed by the Assembly, and had his first meeting with Princeton alums, gathered for the annual Princeton luncheon. He told them "it was a slightly peculiar speech to give, as I had not yet assumed office."

Beginning his presidency with an address to the church was consonant with Iain Torrance's understanding of his calling as an academic. He is a church theologian.

Born in Aberdeen and educated at the University of Edinburgh (M.A.), St. Andrews University (B.D.), and Oxford University (D.Phil.), he began ministry in 1982 in a parish church in the Shetland Islands, 200 miles north of the Scottish mainland. There amid the beauty of sea and sky and the isolation that comes of islands, he pastored the people of five small churches in Northmavine.



Iain R. Torrance

Photo: Erin Dunigan

“It was a challenge to form community there,” he says. “In an island community like that, my wife and I came as outsiders. Our immediate task was to be trusted. There was no ‘how to’ book. The key, I think, was to be present, to listen, and to provide pastoral support.

“Such communities are often riven by tragedy—like deaths in road accidents, and early cancer deaths. And Shetland has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe. All of these factors bound us to them, and people did accept us.” Torrance says that those three-and-a-half years in Northmavine were also important ones in his marriage, as he and his wife grew to know one another and shape their relationship.

While in the Shetlands, Torrance began another kind of pastoring—to the military community. He became a reservist chaplain, which took him into the community of the unchurched.

“I found this ministry different from the parish, and very enjoyable,” he says. “I learned a lot. Like the importance of confidentiality. As a chaplain, I was not a part of the chain of command, and I had to be a citizen of two worlds: trusted by the military, yet also an agent of Christ’s church. The community we formed, those serving in the military and their chaplains, was strong. I baptized babies, conducted weddings and funerals.”

Torrance stayed on as a reservist chaplain after he left the Shetlands for Birmingham, England, to teach, first at Queen’s College, and then at the University of Birmingham. He volunteered to go to the first Gulf War, but the land war ended before he could deploy. He was later appointed convener of the Church of Scotland’s committee on chaplaincy.

Visiting troops in Bosnia just before that war ended, Torrance came to understand what he calls a theology of presence. “If you are expecting soldiers to uncover mass graves, as we did in Bosnia, it is good if there is a chaplain for them to talk to,” he says. “These experiences made me ask questions about the presence of a minister in extreme situations, like at an execution. The position of the church is complicated.

“It is right for the church to have a chaplain to stand on the scaffold to minister to those who are dying and to stand with those who are carrying out the death sentence. I learned to see how ethical issues are joined up. There is no easy, logical way forward, but we must learn to go forward in love.”

While moderator, Torrance visited all units of the British Armed Forces serving in Iraq as well as some American units. Never a supporter of the war, when he returned home he wrote to British prime minister Tony Blair, giving his sense of the growing cooperation he had seen in February. And Blair wrote back, grateful for Torrance’s visit and report.

“The chaplaincy has been part of my life for 20 years,” Torrance explains. He believes it has helped him to understand ambiguity. “I am interested in and committed to the role of the Christian minister in ambiguous situations.”

He cites an example from Bosnia. “The Bosnian war was unspeakably cruel, and I remember visiting a chaplain there. He single-handedly kept families of elderly people in the hills alive, giving them flour, oil, and candles. He reached out to Croat, Serb, and Muslim—old people who lived in abject poverty in the hills, their extended families having moved on or been killed. There is an immense amount of good that a minister can contribute in reversing hatred.”

Along with this intimate pastoral experience, Torrance brings to Princeton Seminary a wealth of academic experience, both in administration and teaching.

As dean of the Faculty of Arts and Divinity that had 92 full-time academic faculty and 3,000 students, he relied on two teams—an administrative team and an academic team. He says he learned certain key lessons about keeping an academic institution on a healthy course. First, the importance of involving colleagues in decision-making. “The most unexpected things can come out of cooperation,” he says. “You need a collegiality of a kind that people feel supported. I make decisions, but the decisions are based on hearing and understanding what other people say, from their unique points of view. I don’t just mean a trade-off of interests, but a real understanding of what unintended consequences could be of a decision that ignored input from others.”

Second, Torrance is committed to the importance of what he calls “holding transparency.” He says people “need to see why certain things are prioritized, so as to better understand decisions that may be unpopular.” He appreciated Aberdeen’s principal introducing a meeting planner software to the campus that functioned as an integrated diary, enabling people to know what colleagues were doing, and to encourage accessibility and teamwork.

“This doesn’t mean micromanaging,” Torrance says, “but rather colleagues acting as dialogue partners for each other, offering help across departmental lines.”

Publications by Iain R. Torrance

Christology After Chalcedon: Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite (originally printed by the Canterbury Press, 1988), now Wipf and Stock, reprint, 1998)

To Glorify God: Essays on Modern Reformed Liturgy (T&T Clark, 1999), coeditor and contributor

Bio-Ethics for the New Millennium, 2000, editor. A volume of lectures from a 1999 Church of Scotland conference on human genetics.

Dr. Torrance also edits the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.



Iain and Morag Torrance with their children in a family picture taken in 1991, just before Iain expected to deploy to the Gulf War as a chaplain.

Torrance believes that at the heart of the academic enterprise are core intellectual skills: truth-telling, compassion, sharing, honesty, and respect. “One should try to inculcate these skills in students, no matter what discipline one is teaching. Learning is not just about the transfer of knowledge, but about values.”

His own academic passions are patristics, in which he did his doctoral work, and Christian ethics. He believes the early Christian writers provide foundational documents for the contemporary church that can be exciting and helpful reading for today’s ministers. “For example, Cyprian of Carthage wrote treatises on the unity of the church catholic as a unity that is beyond our human reach and not of our own creating,” he explains. “Augustine, in his struggle with the Donatists, had to find a way of distinguishing what makes valid a sacrament—the purity of the person presiding, or the fact that they are sacraments of Christ.”

Torrance believes analogies from church history don’t prove an exact match, but they do provide a framework and give a vocabulary with which to address unprecedented questions the church faces today. “They help us avoid bipolar situations where those on each side of a ‘purity’ or ‘unity’ discussion demonize the other as disloyal or unfaithful,” he says. “In Scotland we have a smaller church, and so face divisive issues perhaps less than you do in America. And our church has not suffered from historic divisions like the Civil War.”

The new president looks forward to teaching in the Seminary’s history department, but not to duplicate what other faculty in the department are offering. “At the right time, I will seek an appropriate and complementary area in church history to teach,” he says. “I would very much like to have avenues in which I have direct access to students.”

Boundary-crossing issues are also very close to Torrance’s heart, be they theological or ecclesial. He wrote an article titled “Fear of Being Left Out and Confidence in Being Included: The Liturgical Celebration of Ecclesial Boundaries” in *To Glorify God: Essays on Modern Reformed Liturgy*, which he also coedited with Bryan Sparks. In the article, which comments on baptismal liturgies, he writes about “a distinctiveness which is real, but not excluding,” and points to the limits of vocabulary in trying to express “a boundary which is not a perimeter.” He believes that spatial terms can mislead in discussion of ecclesial boundaries. For him, an ecclesial boundary is “a stage of growth, not a completion; a matter of deepening and promise more than being inside rather than outside.” Such a boundary “maintains an openness to the future, an eschatology, which prevents a hardening of the boundaries now.”

Torrance sees a similar shifting of boundaries in the activities and parables of Jesus, who is “constantly concerned with the question of offense and the undoing of limit.” He believes that true Christian unity is given to humanity by God; “not that we love God, but that Christ loved us.”

As in his scholarship, Iain Torrance prizes boundary-crossing in the work of ministry. For the past decade he has been a member of the dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Church, and knows that that dialogue has shaped him. “I wouldn’t be who I am without it.” He points out that in its early stages, the dialogue was academic, mostly male and mostly northern. “But then they invited in a woman from the Congo, and another woman from Korea. There was a determination to allow participants to reflect the shape of the Reformed family. It must have been difficult for the Orthodox, because a dialogue that had been academic and orderly became vibrant and unruly, with different questions on the agenda.”

Torrance was often the person who attempted the first draft of the dialogue’s statements, and began to see how boundaries were changing. “It is now very difficult to identify what is distinctively and exclusively ‘Reformed,’ he explains. He began to speak of “a Reformed style, of instincts, of an energy, of a vision. Even of improvisation.”

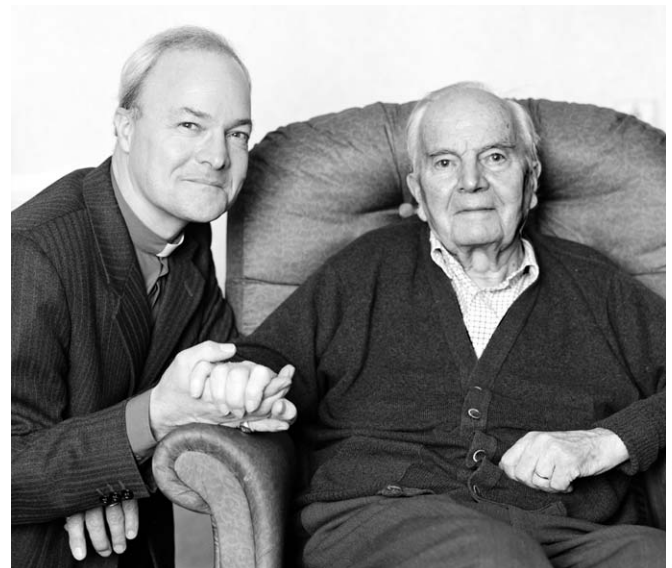
As moderator, Torrance visited Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, North and South Sudan, Iraq, and China. He saw the camps for the thousands of displaced people at the edge of Khartoum, and was invited to share in worship “with people who had literally nothing.”

“I marveled at the discipline of their schools and the avid attention of the pupils,” he says. “I went into southern Sudan and have never been made to feel more welcome or more powerless. And now we all know of the genocide in the northwest, in Dafur. Seeing this made me contextualize our western moral obsessions. I realized in visiting these places and these people that the world had changed for me, too.”

And now Iain Torrance comes to take up a calling as the Seminary’s sixth president.

It is not his first time in Princeton. In 1959 he was here as a child, while his father, theologian Thomas F. Torrance, a friend and guest of President McCord, was giving lectures at the Seminary. “Our family lived in Tennent Hall,” he remembers. “It was a very happy time; everything was new and exciting.”

He delighted in wisteria, fireflies, and Princeton’s rare black squirrels. He remembers “the friendliness of the people,” and that Speer Library was brand new. “Coming back to a place you once visited as a child is like a dream half-remembered,” he says.



A recent photograph of Iain Torrance with his father, Thomas F. Torrance. Father and son both served as moderators of the Church of Scotland.

Photo: Luke Watson

And the ten-year-old Iain is remembered, too. At this May's alumni/ae reunion, Mary (Pakosh) Cureton, Class of 1961, recalled babysitting for Iain and his brother and sister in their Tennent Hall apartment. "They were such sweet kids," she said. "The girls in Tennent kind of adopted them. I remember that Iain had sandy hair and he was being tutored in Greek!" No one was more surprised than Cureton to hear the announcement of the Seminary's new president!

In a way, though, admits Torrance, his father's relationship with Princeton and friendship with McCord ("I think Dr. McCord may have been my father's closest friend") made him avoid the Seminary. "I wanted to be myself and not to milk my father's networks. My father's rooting was always in Reformed theology, Calvin and Barth. His relationships in the church and the academy are part of me. But I am not a clone, and have tried deliberately to move into new areas."

Leaving Scotland means that both Iain and his wife must leave their parents, all of whom are still living, but are frail. "That's difficult," he says, "but with frequent flights it is not really so far." For Morag, who is an elder in the Church of Scotland, it also means leaving her job as manager of the IT training unit at the University of Aberdeen.

The Torrances will also leave their two children in Scotland studying at university. Their son Hew has just completed a biomedical degree and may take it further. Their daughter Robyn ("she is wacky and creative," says Torrance impishly) is studying design and photography in Edinburgh and did a summer job as head cook at a pub in Edinburgh's Grassmarket. But Iain and Morag will bring along two miniature longhaired dachshunds, Maud and Cassiopia, and a cat named Smudge.

Ecclesiastically, Princeton's new president will join the Presbyterian Church (USA), and be examined for membership in New Brunswick Presbytery. He will also keep his ordination in the Church of Scotland, where he has many friends and much history. He serves as a chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen in Scotland. (Although he has determined it the better part of wisdom not to use the designation TD after his name in the States, for the Territorial Decoration she bestowed on him, having been advised that some Americans will think he has just scored a touchdown!)

He is also a friend of Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury; the two overlapped at Oxford. He hopes Williams may be able to speak at his inauguration ceremony in March.

But Princeton is where his vision will focus and his heart will rest. "I have great faith in the future of Princeton Seminary and of this church in world history," Torrance affirms. "The school has great potential to do an astonishing amount of good in the theater of world Christianity. That is ultimately what drew me here."

Those who have known, and those who have recently met Iain Torrance believe that he will be successful in his vision. Trustee Earl Palmer, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle and a member of the search committee, heard it in the prayer Torrance offered during the search process. "From the beginning, I sensed that this man was a servant-leader with the gift of wisdom," says Palmer. "What I see in Iain Torrance is a man who has a warm heart for people, a strong and thoughtful confidence in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ, and a lifelong commitment to the church."

It is certain that this gracious man who both takes his God and his work deeply seriously, and yet takes himself not too seriously, will have the prayers of the worldwide Princeton Seminary family as he takes up his calling. ■



Photo: Elaine Odell Photography

Dr. Torrance visits with Professor Stacy Johnson and his wife, Louise Lawson Johnson, at the General Assembly in Richmond.



Photo: Joshua Sutherland

President Torrance with former president Thomas Gillespie in April, when Torrance was introduced to the faculty and staff.

Alumni/ae and Friends Gatherings with President Torrance

Dr. Torrance looks forward to meeting Princeton Seminary alumni/ae and friends around the country and the world. During the coming academic year, he will attend alumni/ae and friends gatherings in the following cities.

- September 22: Philadelphia
- September 29: New Jersey (at Princeton Seminary)
- October 6: New York City
- October 19: Washington, D.C.
- November 10: Chicago
- December 6: Atlanta
- January 19: Tampa-St. Petersburg
- March 15: Pittsburgh
- April 25: San Diego
- April 25: Newport Beach
- April 26: Los Angeles
- April 27: San Francisco
- June 6: Seattle
- June 7: Portland

For more information, go to <http://www.ptsem.edu/bond/alumni/alumevents.htm>.

Dr. Torrance's inauguration as president will be held on Friday, March 11, 2005.