
20 March 2022

UNI Faculty Senate

Greetings!

I write in support of Dr. Jerome Soneson's application for emeritus status. Jerry arrived at UNI in 1991, after receiving his B.A. at North Park College, and an M.Div, M.A. and Ph.D. at Harvard University. Over the course of his 31 years at UNI, Jerry has epitomized what it means to be a teacher-scholar and a colleague.

Although Jerry was hired to teach religion, he is one of the few faculty in the department who is trained specifically in both religion and philosophy. Throughout his career, his research focused on exploring the contributions of philosophers to theological thinking and theologians to philosophical thinking. His book, *Pragmatism and Pluralism: John Dewey's Significance for Theology* exemplifies his interest cross-disciplinary engagement. His specific focus on pragmatism, particularly in the work of John Dewey underscores his understanding of philosophy as a discipline inseparable from the social realities in which we live. Viewed from this perspective, both philosophy and theology, for example, examine questions of normative judgments that cannot be divorced from their cultural situatedness. One can see this interest in Jerry's other publications, which often dealt with complicated questions about the environment, nationalism, and war.

Jerry's teaching underscores his engagement in these two disciplines central to the liberal arts. For Jerry, education is about how we live our best lives, how we create meaning, and how we make the world better by our actions. He was a staunch defender of the Humanities Program, not only serving for many years as advisor to Humanities majors, but also teaching Humanities courses regularly and with gusto. He contributed widely to the Liberal Arts Core, with courses ranging from Religions of the World to The Idea of the University to The Holocaust in Literature and Film. In the department, he regularly taught Religion and Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Religion and its Critics, and American Pragmatism: James and Dewey. He also co-taught a course with Steve O'Kane (Biology) on Religion, Ideas of God, and Evolution, and many courses in the Honors Program. In all of these courses, he taught students how to read and discuss difficult texts and ideas, stretching them to expand their perspectives and consider their place in the world carefully. Jerry always met students where they are, but also pushed them to hone their critical thinking, speaking, and writing skills. He is a masterful leader of class discussion. He was in the first cohort of recipients of the University Book & Supply Outstanding Teaching Award, which is a further testament to his excellent teaching.

Jerry has also given many hours of service to the institution. In the 1990s, he was a member and later co-chair, of UNI's Qualities of an Educated Person project, a group that engaged in important conversations about what a UNI education should and could do for our students. He served as a member of the Faculty Senate at two different times during his career. He has advised student organizations, worked on various

Task Forces, served on, and chaired, search committees. He is currently a member of the Program Vitality Committee. His thoughtful approach to problems, his collegiality, and his desire to contribute to the growth of the institution have made him an excellent committee member. He has also contributed to his professional organizations, engaging in scholarly conversations on a variety of topics. He served the university, college, and department as Head for ten years, in addition to two stints as interim Head. He has provided calm and careful leadership in difficult circumstances, always confronting challenges with evidence and considered arguments. He endeavored always to be fair, to reflect on all sides of the issue, and to make decisions with care. He has been a passionate and unwavering defender of our department and our programs, always working to emphasize their centrality to a liberal education at UNI.

When I came to UNI, my office was across the hall from Jerry's. I remember having numerous helpful conversations with him about teaching; his advice and mentoring has been crucial to my success in the classroom and beyond. He has always been generous with his time, and a good conversation partner whenever I needed someone to think with. I have very much appreciated his support during my many years at UNI.

I understand why Jerry wants to retire, but I must say that I wish he'd decided to stay around a bit longer. I do look forward to continuing my conversations with him when he takes on his new title, Dr. Soneson, Professor Emeritus.

Sincerely,

Susan E. Hill

Susan E. Hill, Head
Department of Philosophy & World Religions