

**Themes for a Common Conversation about the
ELCA Theological Education Network**
Conference of ELCA Seminary Leaders
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Church membership, attendance, and giving are declining across our church. The larger cultural, spiritual, and religious patterns at the root of these declines are pressing our institutions toward reform. Seminaries are navigating profound economic and systemic pressure, even as we address the need for breadth and diversity in theological education. The Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) has provided important research and recommendations that illumine many of these challenges and suggest strategies for moving forward. The call for reform in our theological education network, the rapidly changing cultural and economic landscape, and the unsustainable models of theological education around which our entire church leadership system is oriented (candidacy, assignment, rostering, etc.) have contributed to a volatile period of change and reform that theological schools must address. Along with our boards and other partners, the ELCA seminary leaders are committed to addressing the significant challenges before us and building a new approach to theological education that addresses the leadership needs of the world around us in a financially responsible way. We have met eight times during the past academic year. Recognizing the extreme complexities we face as individual schools and as a network of theological education, we have committed to a similar pattern in the coming year.

To date, we have engaged in a number of innovative initiatives at both structural and programmatic levels. Each of these initiatives is undertaken with the intention of addressing critical issues, such as mission effectiveness, financial sustainability, student debt, and the growing shortage of leaders. Examples of these initiatives include institutional partnerships of LTSS and Lenoir-Rhyne University; PLTS and California Lutheran University; and the reconfiguration of LTSG and LTSP. In addition to these structural initiatives, we are also developing programmatic initiatives, together and individually, that test new models of theological education for their effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. Both structural and programmatic initiatives are helping us learn more about the way forward. Governance and partnerships create complexities but may also open new opportunities for strengthening a common theological enterprise. Examples of this include:

Enrollment and common application

Recognizing that our church has a widening gap between the number of pastors we need and the number of pastors we have, we pledge ourselves to initiatives that hold promise for increasing enrollment across the entire network, and are considering a common application process to reduce the complexity of entering into formal theological education.

Supporting varied forms of vocational service

We recognize that our changing church has a growing need for forms of theological education that can support and inform varied kinds of rostered leadership. We are agreed upon the need

to work cooperatively to develop training programs that will support the new Deacon roster and other forms of ministry.

Developing ethnic diversity among ELCA leaders

We commit ourselves to a shared vision that works with the whole church to increase the ethnic diversity of future leaders so that the face of our leadership reflects the rich human variety found in the church and the world today. Congruent with this, we share a commitment to promote antiracism training and work toward intercultural competency in the preparation of all leaders across the network of seminaries.

Spanish language MDiv and lay leadership training

We pledge continued effort toward the development of a Spanish language MDiv degree and development of lay leadership programs for the Latino/a church. This vision is built upon the growing need for the ELCA to address the burgeoning Latino/a population in the US and the understanding that while no seminary has the faculty to do this alone, together we do. Strong commitments have been made between the seminary presidents to explore and support this initiative and it is being highly encouraged by the Domestic Mission unit of the ELCA.

Commitment to our faculties

We acknowledge a sharp dilemma in our network of theological education. We both need to find ways to provide long term, continued support for our faculty members who are called to teaching ministries and need to consider the ways that tenure as presently configured may reduce the ability for seminaries to act fluidly within a changing context. Together, we will look at models of faculty support that seek to achieve greater flexibility and a redefinition of tenure in order for our seminaries to be fully responsive to the changing theological landscape, while honoring academic freedom and meeting accreditation standards.

Comparable faculty loads and compensation

In order to retain high-quality teaching faculty and deploy them nimbly and equitably across the network, comparable faculty loads and compensation must be developed. Insofar as possible (given that two seminaries are embedded within university systems), we will seek to establish more uniform teaching load expectations and compensation formulas, taking into consideration the programmatic circumstances of each seminary.

Sustainable student-to-faculty/staff ratios

We recognize that ELCA MDiv student enrollments at our eight schools are half the number they were two decades ago. Coupled with this decline, the per-graduate cost has undergone a comparable increase. This is despite overall reductions to faculty and staff across the network, and sometimes due to shifting staff roles not previously needed but now required. As a result, the aggregate cost of faculty and staff members across the network exceeds the financial capacity for its support. We therefore agree to seek ways to (1) share existing faculty and staff among our seminaries, and (2) use a collaborative and mutually consultative process for hiring any new faculty member within the network.

Sustainable PhD programs

We will explore the need for PhD level training within the ELCA and for its global church partners and seek to consider the number of seminaries conferring the degree. We will invite the ELCA Conference of Bishops into a conversation concerning the possibility of designating some portion of companion synod support for the purpose of PhD leadership education.

Global partnerships

We commit ourselves to thinking and imagining collaboratively in order to work with our global church partners in developing programs that will be of mutual benefit, providing the theologically formed leaders that we all need for our increasingly interconnected mission contexts.

Number and location of ELCA seminaries

We will enter into earnest conversation about the number and location of the eight (soon to be seven) seminaries, and pledge to support a new vision that could realign or move seminaries to best serve the church in the world that is unfolding. We acknowledge that the two mergers and one reconfiguration that have already been undertaken will bear upon the issue of future joint ventures and potential relocations.

We have deep collective history and tradition across our eight seminaries, and we pledge to employ these as resources toward a reimagined future for our schools. We are thankful to be part of a larger church body that includes invested partners. We need one another. We need you to be “with us,” supporting us not only through prayer, conversations, and financial commitment, but also by examining the ways in which your own institutions, areas of authority, and systems affect the health of theological education. Strengthening theological education cannot be an isolated enterprise, but must be part of a cooperative approach that asks hard questions and together takes on difficult challenges for the sake of the gospel. In addition to your partnership in analyzing and addressing systemic issues, we also request assistance from the wider church in creating, coordinating, and prioritizing a churchwide effort to identify and recruit a diverse cadre of new leaders. We believe this effort belongs to the whole church and can be most effectively accomplished with a comprehensive plan. Along with our governing boards, we affirm the value of an ecology of theological education and seek to strengthen it for the sake of our common commitment to God’s mission. We invite your ongoing partnership as we navigate the challenging circumstances ahead.

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