




For such
a time
as this



Lutheran School of
Theology *at* Chicago

Updated Strategic Plan
2023–2024



The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago recognizes that our school stands on the lands of the Potawatomi, Miami, and Peoria peoples. For thousands of years before their forced removal, this was their traditional homeland, and it continues to hold their ancestral stories and wisdom. We honor and thank the elders of these and other nations, past and present. These lands are still home to many indigenous people, and we are grateful to learn in this place. As a Reconciling in Christ seminary, LSTC seeks to offer hospitality and welcome to all who enter LSTC's academic programs. Following Jesus Christ, whose reconciling love bridged barriers and made strangers friends, we seek to welcome and learn from one another's particularity – including but not limited to one another's race, national or ethnic origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, physical ability, social status and theological diversity.



Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Office of the President

2 December 2022

Dear friends:

This is not the original letter introducing our strategic plan, but an update. Two years ago, we launched this plan in times that were decidedly unsettling. Back then, the pandemic was young, social unrest was rising, our planet was at risk. None of that has abated but instead amplified and accelerated. Likewise, the changes and challenges buffeting seminaries back then have not relented but increased. You might think, then, that our original strategic plan looks now like a bygone fashion, weary and outmoded. True, it does need significant revision, which explains this letter, but surprisingly this is not because our plan became obsolete. It's instead because our plan truly worked during its first two years, calling for a shrewd response.

Just as back in 2020, there is no moment as important, essential, or optimal for good planning as these tumultuous times. Nearly everything once taken for granted in the wider church about preparing people for ministry is now thrown open. What we never dreamt possible suddenly is available. To be sure, the basics of our faith – the relentless, unearned love of God for people like us – remain solid and trustworthy. But how to convey such good news, or how a seminary forms leaders for new patterns of church, are being explored anew. At this very moment, our best thinking matters, and so this revised, refocused strategic plan matters.

Our original three-year plan truly worked in that its most important initiatives on moral and material sustainability pulled everything else into their orbit, while other first and second year initiatives were normalized into our operations. Today, then, we can reassess and redeploy our work to attend to new kinds of institutional planning, **for such a time as this**. To be clear, as we engage the challenges of our wider world and in theological education, we still hold to several core claims – that God's love is freely given, that Jesus' message is lasting life, that the Spirit's work still reconciles. As always, we want to form leaders with character for unforeseen times, so they can declare hope and promise that sustains us, whatever befalls.

This plan outlines the main steps toward that focal purpose. Please review the **grounding** for this plan (pages 2-4), the **overview** of its themes (page 5), the **strategies** on which we are focused (pages 6-7), and the **monitoring** of our progress (page 8). Please also regard this as your invitation to join us as we discern our school's path during the dynamic years ahead. We are richly blessed with excellent faculty, committed staff, energetic students, wise boards, loyal alumni, and generous donors. We welcome your deeper engagement as well. May we have holy vision that accords with God's ways in these days we gladly embrace.

Sincerely,

James Nieman, PhD
President

Terry Goff
Chair, Board of Directors

Developing this strategic plan

stage	prepare		discover		implement		monitor	
step	authorize	review	gather	propose	design	execute	assess	update
task	determining readiness and stages for process ahead	examining in depth core institutional commitments	collecting current data and new information	summarizing major insights that suggest priority areas	creating comprehensive, integrated, and credible plan	launching workable annual plan to be monitored	evaluating progress to share with stakeholders	reviewing outcomes in order to plot corrections
outcome	decision to proceed	value, mission, vision claims	data to make decisions	initial strategic choices	developed strategic plan	workplan for implementing	monitoring mechanisms	revise plan as needed
timing	Nov–Dec 2019	Jan–Apr 2020	May–Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov–Dec 2020	Jan 2021–Dec 2023	

This timeline shows the stages and steps for developing our strategic plan. The remarks below detail the major moments along this timeline, an intentional and extensive process that included substantial participation, research, and decision-making.

PREPARE

The Board of Directors acted to **authorize** the development of a strategic plan for calendar years 2021–2023, assisted by Credo consulting. Seminary staff provided Credo with 18 documents about the range of the school’s operations, and Credo administered its “Thriving Framework Diagnostic Tool” to all Cabinet members. These materials were subject to **review** during a Cabinet retreat in January, followed by information gathering sessions with the Board Executive Committee and all staff and faculty in March. The Steering Committee was appointed during this time and worked with Credo that spring to summarize materials and prepare for the meetings.

DISCOVER

The most extensive labor during the planning process occurred as the Steering Committee began to **gather** existing information and discern further research. This material was distributed into three themes, with the Committee divided into “theme teams” to explore it more closely. Meeting weekly during the summer, teams sought further insights and conducted over sixty stakeholder interviews. This culminated in a three-day Committee meeting in September to **propose** dozens of initiatives for each theme and prioritize those with greatest potential. Though still in rough form, this was the first overall draft of the comprehensive plan you are reading.

IMPLEMENT

During a quite compressed period, the President, theme team leaders, and Director of Marketing met to **design** a fully developed form of the plan. This included editing the initiatives, reordering some of the structure, and sketching an internal workplan for later use. This was presented to the Board of Directors for initial review and subsequent revision. By the time of its fall meeting, the Board acted to **execute** the plan so that it could be launched in 2021. Cabinet members and other staff then completed the workplan details in the first full year of implementation.

MONITOR

Launch of the plan included selecting subsets of priority initiatives for each year from the initial set of 24 initiatives. Priority initiatives were assigned an owner and sponsor to ensure accountability and support for achieving the initiative’s outcomes and normalizing the work of each initiative into regular seminary operations. The Cabinet was able to **assess** progress toward established goals through monthly reports by initiative owners. Regular reports were made to the Board of Directors. In response to a rapidly changing context connected to the sale and relocation of the main campus property, in May 2022 the Board instructed the administration to prepare an **update** to the strategic plan that reduced the number of initiatives to address reduced staff capacity and focus on the central themes of moral and material sustainability.

Mission, values, marks, vision

This strategic plan builds directly on several long-standing formal commitments of our school. Each has been articulated by the Board of Directors in four approved statements regarding our mission, values, marks, and vision. These statements guide how we will address new challenges while ensuring that the plan is aligned with the history and gifts of this seminary.

MISSION

What we do best, our central purpose

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, forms visionary leaders to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

VALUES

What we deeply believe, our guiding principles

Christ-centered—Striving by God’s grace to follow Christ’s call into loving service, directed and impelled by the Spirit’s transformative power

Responsive to context—Embracing our diverse setting and academic environment in order to learn from and minister to the community

Attentive to diversity—Knowing and honoring cultural, ethnic, and religious perspectives to build communities of hospitality and reconciliation

Committed to excellence—Preparing leaders who are academically, practically, and spiritually ready to serve in a variety of vocational settings



MARKS

Who we are distinctly, our special character

Urban—LSTC is an urban seminary that believes the best way to prepare leaders to witness to the gospel in any setting is to provide them with a diversity of experiences found in a large city. This context is also crucial for those intending to specialize in urban ministry.

Global—LSTC equips leaders for the church in the United States and the world, engaging gifts that international faculty, students, and their families bring to the community, and structuring a curriculum that integrates care of creation and worldwide peace and justice into its degree programs and daily life.

Ecumenical—LSTC is a member of one of the largest theological consortia in the world, the Association of Chicago Theological Schools (ACTS). This resource and the contributions of its own ecumenical staff, faculty, and student community members give students access to a broad array of opportunities for education that is thoroughly Lutheran yet respectful of other Christian traditions.

Multicultural—LSTC’s theological commitment to diversity is a high priority and makes the seminary a rich environment in which to equip leaders of all cultures.

Interfaith—LSTC’s specializations in Christian-Muslim and Jewish-Christian relations and its wide-ranging studies in world religions and interfaith dialogue prepare students to exercise pastoral and public leadership in an increasingly multifaith world.

University-related—LSTC is located by intention near the University of Chicago. Through interaction with the university faculty and students and other educational resources, including the university’s libraries, LSTC relates theological education and ministerial preparation to the wider search for wisdom in our society.

VISION

Where we are going, our emerging direction

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago seeks to build up the body of Christ and work for a world of peace and justice that cares for the whole creation.

For such a time as this...

James Nieman, President

Strategic plans are maligned for demanding great effort but producing little change, an ocean of words with a teacup of results. This is not our experience, though. At our school, good plans align our work and guide our action in ways that make a real difference. For example, a report to an accreditor about our recently completed strategic plan ran a dozen pages of single-spaced text supported by twenty-six appendices, marking major gains in nearly every one of that plan's twenty-seven tactics arrayed across twelve strategies. Our plans neither "sit on a shelf" as some lament, nor is our active engagement accidental. An effective strategic plan focuses on something meaningful that matters, has genuine urgency. Such a plan is literally "timely" if not "momentous," eventful for our mission right now and in the impending years. A truly strategic plan convinces you that to do something else would just be a waste of time.

That is why this strategic plan has the title it does. What we say here, how we enact it, and where it can lead are precisely **for such a time as this**. Maybe you've heard that phrase before, a vague recollection that you cannot quite place. It sounds like something from scripture—and so it is, but from one of the less visited portions. It comes from a dramatic turning point in the book of Esther, a story rarely read in Christian churches that was almost left out of the canon because, like the Song of Songs, it never directly mentions God. In fact, though, the story is saturated with concerns about faithful living in difficult days. Originating twenty-four centuries ago, it recounts a period during the Persian empire when Jews were scattered far from their homeland—a minority within the dominant culture, outcasts on the fringe of respectability, a vulnerable and curious clan far from the seat of imperial might. That is, until Esther.

At first, she faced the plight of her Jewish compatriots, maybe worse. Orphaned and alone, Esther was finally adopted as daughter by Mordecai, an elder cousin. But in a complex twist, the Persian king comes to notice and favor her, naming Esther as queen. So far, then, the story is just a fairy tale, a reversal of fortunes. It's what happens next that matters. Mordecai hears of a plot to kill all the Jews in the empire, and begs Esther, now queen, for help. Though also a Jew,



her identity had remained hidden, so speaking out now puts her at grave risk. And in Mordecai's only direct words in this entire story, he replies to Esther by laying out two irreconcilable options: the shame of her silence *at such a time as this*, or the promise of her role *for such a time of this* (4:14). Nothing matters so much as which action Esther takes with the power she has on which so many lives now depend. I hope you'll read your Bible to see what she does.

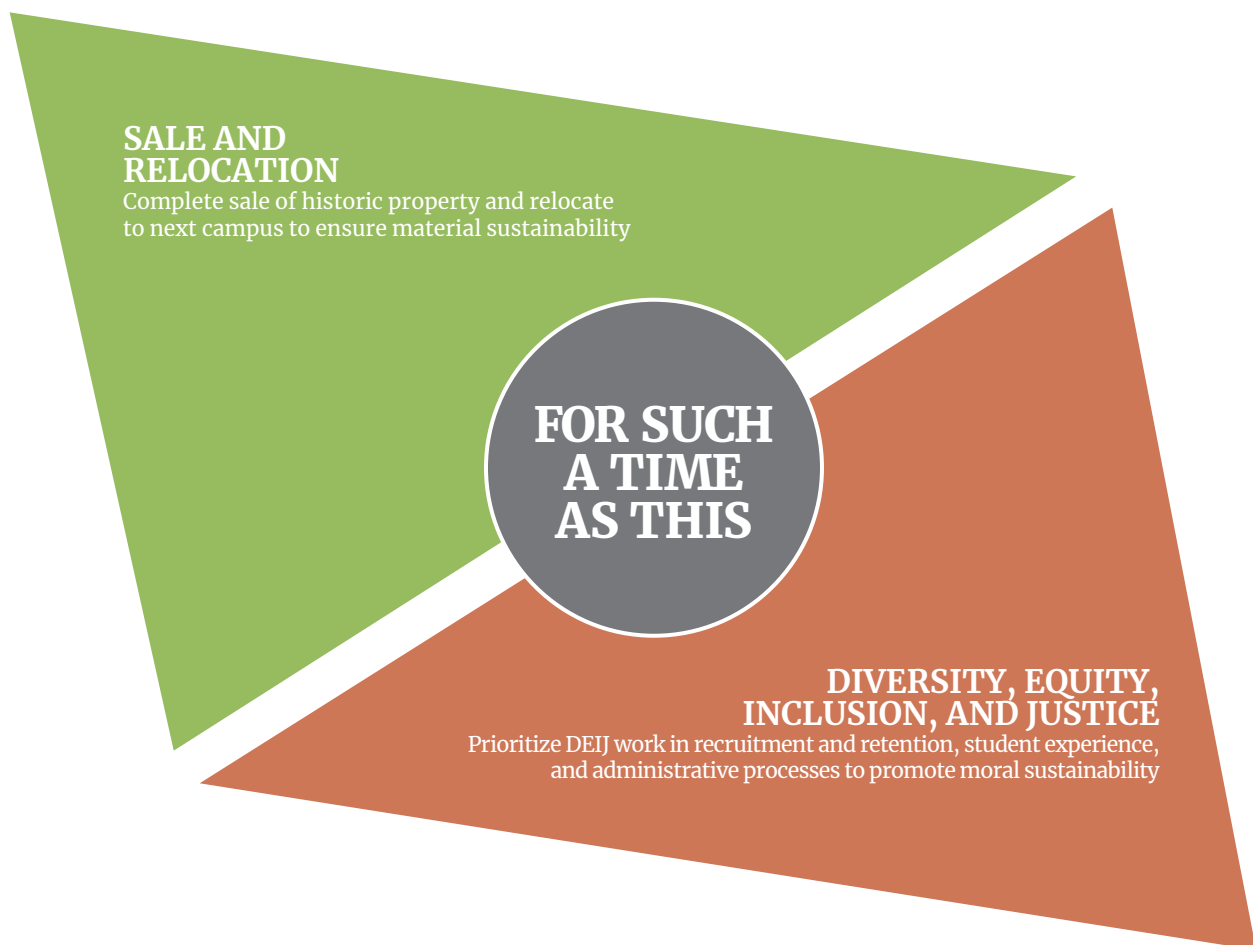
Maybe you think this drifts far from strategic planning, but I see it otherwise. In the end, this plan is not wishful thinking about what we aspire might happen someday, somehow. Instead, it clearly reckons with what these times place before us, ask of us, call from us. In her day and role, Esther had power to make a difference. So do we—not just individually but institutionally. Our school has power to act faithfully in forming visionary leaders. This is not some recent trend we glibly adopt but the lasting call we gladly accept—called into the world for this time, engaging our situation out of love of God and of neighbor. This strategic plan describes our responsibility and role for the sake of our students who will serve, our church in its witness, and our school as we adapt to change. Put another way, this plan directs our best efforts in hope for God's time, not anxiety for our own—that is, *for such a time as this*.

Overview of plan themes

To ensure that our work would result in a truly comprehensive and integrated strategic plan, we used a “balanced scorecard” approach to develop the original version of the plan. This well tested, highly respected method does not reduce an institution to one measure for success but adopts four perspectives, each of which contributes to sustainability. These four are: (a) capacities, (b) processes, (c) resources, and (d) stakeholders. The steering committee examined our school from each of these perspectives to identify successes, name problems, raise questions, and make proposals. The resulting initiatives were then drawn together into three coherent themes that provided structure for the original version of this plan.

At the Board’s direction, a revision to the strategic plan was initiated in May 2022 which reduced the number of initiatives for the remainder of the plan’s three-year term to six and reorganized them under two new themes: **Sale and Relocation** and **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice**.

Taken together, these two themes in the revised and refined strategic plan chart a path forward for the seminary in which sustainability is understood in both material and moral dimensions, asking “Where will we make our home?” and “How will we enact our values?” The answers to these questions are summarized in the subheading for each theme and further elaborated in the detail for each theme that follows (pages 6–7).





SALE AND RELOCATION

Complete sale of historic property and relocate to next campus to ensure material sustainability

WHERE WILL WE MAKE OUR HOME?

The original strategic plan addressed issues of resource sustainability with an initiative titled “Redeveloped Facilities” that included careful reconsideration of our educational space needs. As a result of the groundwork laid by this early priority initiative, the revised strategic plan expands this area of work into a new theme with a new set of initiatives that will see us through the transition from our current main campus property to our next home.

As that work was beginning, the Covid-19 pandemic led us to rethink where we work, how we connect, and what we teach as we endeavored to be even more sound stewards of our resources. As a result, LSTC is emerging as a stronger faith community—and a school still in motion as we learn how to be a new kind of seminary.

After three years of Board review, two years of strategic planning, and one year of negotiations, the sale of our main educational facility will close near the start of 2023. We will cede ownership of our fifty-six-year-old home, leasing back part of it through mid-2023, then relocating to another Hyde Park space that will better serve our mission and community into the future. *For such a time as this*, we are on the move, committed to and curious about God’s future for us and our whole church.



LEGAL AND FINANCIAL

Complete the legal processes related to the sale of our main campus property; research and communicate how this sale relates to our long-term financial sustainability model.

SPACE NEEDS AND SITES

Define how we will utilize our current property for the remainder of the time in our present facilities; select our next main campus site; plan and carry out the move from the former to the latter.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

Plan for and carry out the transition of all information technology systems from our current to our next campus site, with minimum disruption to end users and maximizing opportunities for remote and hybrid learning modalities.



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND JUSTICE

Prioritize DEIJ work in recruitment and retention, student experience, and administrative processes to promote moral sustainability

HOW WILL WE ENACT OUR VALUES?

As a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), LSTC has an important role to play in forming leaders who know and honor the many, rich, and diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious perspectives present throughout the church for the sake of building communities of hospitality and reconciliation. Effective formation requires strong curricular and paracurricular programs oriented towards issues of equity in both church and society as well as decisive action to dismantle policies and practices rooted in racism and White supremacy.

LSTC has made tremendous gains in this area over the last few years, with the formation of the Antiracism Transformation Team and the creation of a new role on staff, the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. We are specifically focusing in our revised strategic plan on concrete ways of reforming our curriculum, core processes, and culture as we move more deeply into our commitment to being an antiracist institution. *For such a time as this*, we are centering the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as the essential core of our moral sustainability during a time of significant transition and vital reimagination.



SEEKING EQUITY

Focus on issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice as they relate to the curriculum and student experience, with special attention to their intersections with issues related to climate health.

BIPOC STUDENT RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

Expand our recruitment and retention efforts in ways that remove barriers and create a supportive learning environment for historically under-represented BIPOC communities.

AUTHENTIC DIVERSITY

Advance work toward the antiracist commitments adopted by the ELCA at its 2019 Churchwide Assembly and detailed in the report, *“How Strategic and Authentic is our Diversity: A Call for Confession, Reflection, and Healing Action.”*

Monitoring our plan's progress

WORKING TOGETHER

Collaboration has been integral to the success of this plan. Each initiative has an “owner” guiding how that portion of the plan will develop, and a “sponsor” serving as coach, conversation partner, and advocate. This team doesn’t do all the work but establishes the specific tasks and people to complete the initiative. Such work is reviewed monthly by the Executive Cabinet through updates that give occasion to analyze, diagnose, and revise. Rather than directly supervising owners, the cabinet has collective oversight of the entire plan, using that perspective to promote institutional thriving and confront systemic barriers. In turn, this is shared with the Board of Directors, whose interaction with the initiatives has improved due to adopting a more workable size and frequent meetings. Across all levels, then, our plan deploys a collective and interactive approach that uses the best gifts of various participants to bring initiatives to completion.

REGULAR UPDATES

The 2021–2023 strategic plan operates on a calendar (not fiscal) year basis. Leading into each year, owners draft workplans that name specific tasks leading to initiative completion, needed resources (human and material), and calendars that project which tasks will be done by when, as well as their anticipated impact. The workplans serve as baseline for the monthly cabinet review mentioned above. One week before these review meetings, owners also post one-page updates on initiative progress, indicating how the previous month’s activity aligned with the workplans and whatever challenges or barriers emerged along the way. The cabinet reviews each initiative every month, typically also inviting an owner to join the meeting for a deeper conversation about their own initiative. The result of this cyclical process is better monitoring of the plan’s progress and a mechanism that is easily adapted to share developments with the board.

SHARED METRICS

Although activities and updates are important, what matters about our strategic plan is that these lead to results that support the school’s thriving. For this reason, during this plan’s first two years, the board developed institution-wide metrics to show whether our work was leading to a common aim. The outcome was a hyperlinked chart of fourteen metrics gathered into six main functions across the school: recruitment/retention, social accountability, program quality, physical assets, operating margin, and financial assets. This chart shows at a glance which areas are working and which need attention, with document links to analysis, evidence, and responses. While the metrics pertain to all operations of the school, they especially help in assessing the strategic plan, which is supposed to play a key role in institutional improvement. During this final year of the plan, shared metrics give the board potent means to deploy resources and set direction.

ANNUAL REVISION

This entire revision and refocus of the final year of our strategic plan is ample evidence that the conventional approach to such planning – a period of review followed by a multiyear plan – has its limitations, especially in times of rapid change. We will therefore use 2023 as a time to explore and transition into a more “evergreen” process of development on a shorter cycle and ongoing basis. To be sure, we want our planning to be truly “strategic” and so will not let it devolve into tactical one-year operational schedules that lose sight of a longer-term vision and the bold steps to reach it. What this plan has taught us, though, is that we can have the best of both worlds. We will develop a three-year core plan that annually cycles off the final year and draws in a new first year, all set against a ten-year horizon for our school’s vision. In a sense, then, the very way we plan strategically will become a seventh institutional initiative this year.





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