



# epistle

WINTER 2024

*The magazine of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

**JAMES NIEMAN**

# **LEADING IN TIMES OF CHANGE**





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HONORING AN ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER

epistle

WINTER 2024 Vol. 55, No. 2

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.

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ON THE COVER President James Nieman in front of the seminary with starlings flying over the building.

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Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

On writing ... and longing

It is not lost on me that this letter that will appear within a publication named for the same kind of literary form—the Epistle, synonym for letter. With every issue of this publication, I offer not so much a letter in a bottle, pleading for rescue, as a letter in a letter, seeking our connection. It's a strange exercise. I do not write for my own benefit, to marvel at my soaring prose. Instead, I write to you, some of whom I've had the gift to meet in person, but most of whom I have never met and now, it seems, never will. Our sporadic research into reader preferences has shown that this letter is the most popular, regularly read item in every issue. That's not because it's consistently wise or grand. My hunch is that you seek a connection as well, with our school and all it represents. I am grateful that, for the past 13 years, this has been a space for us to meet.

Surely this sounds askew. Surely in-person is the gold standard for relationships, with writing only second-best. Maybe so, but in our time bristling with incivility, proximal or remote, that claim has lost its luster. It was not always so. Biblical scholars have noted the compelling influence St. Paul exerted solely by the letters he wrote. The "apostolic parousia," they call it—the vivid presence of Paul among communities he rarely or even never visited. Some have even asked whether letters were his preferred way to embody the gospel mission. Of course, there were times Paul simply could not arrive in person, when he was in prison or across the Mediterranean. But even when it was feasible and Paul was able to draw near, he often did not, assigning instead an emissary to present his epistle, along with promises to meet on another day.

No wonder. In person, Paul's presence among church factions, in the milieu of myriad beliefs, and under imperial control promised to be incendiary. So 14 times in his letters, he either implies or asserts the benefits of writing to his recipients rather than drawing near. If he were present, it could only be briefly, might rouse troubling topics or hard feelings, and later leave them bereft. By writing instead, he was "present" from the moment of the letter's arrival, which itself was an enduring token of their shared bond. Letters also afforded more time to ponder Paul's message and even receive the occasional sting of rebuke. And the benefits extend to us. Indeed, if Paul had not preferred writing, we would have scant awareness of our ancestors, the faith and flaws of their communities, and Paul's practices of engaged concern.

My point is less about letters, Paul's or mine, and more our presence with and absence from each other over the miles and years. Christians have a peculiar sense of such reality. Paul at times thought he would be more present with his cherished churches by staying away. I write this to you on All Saints Sunday, when we affirm the holy host that daily draws close in prayer but from another shore. In theological education (you knew I wouldn't forget the school!) we are learning distance need not be the barrier we once thought. By extending our reach, we equip those who want to be fully present as learners now and leaders one day. Presence and absence are not the changeless, monolithic opposites they first seem. They are nuanced and subtle, drawing us surprisingly close, just like a written word from a friend far away.

In my closing words, then, let me be unoriginal. I offer only what Paul wrote to nearly all his faithful communities: "Grace to you and peace." Hear these few words fully. Paul wishes grace, the free gift of mercy and healing only God can bring. Paired with that, he wishes peace, the promise that comes not in ending strife but in embracing God. These two, grace and peace, are joined: God's gift of Christ whose ways are peace, and the lasting peace we have through that same holy gift. And Paul wishes this to you—a personal yet plural offer for you, for me, for all. How different this is from much of what we meet today, loud voices with other wishes: greed and hatred, envy and division, jealousy and scorn. So, friends present or absent, let us pledge ourselves to that hope, one marked by grace and peace. What kind of space would that be? Write when you find out.



James Nieman LSTC President



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A BLESSED BAPTISM

MDiv student Kylee Bestenlehner on the pilgrimage of a lifetime



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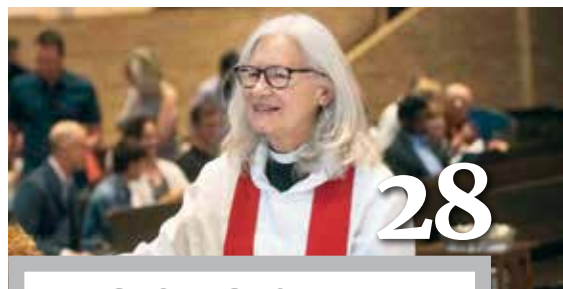
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Project Starling set to launch in 2025



# LEADING LSTC THROUGH A TIME OF TREMENDOUS CHANGE

In an era of dramatic changes in higher theological education, **James Nieman** has proven to be a steadfast leader

By Keisha Dyson

Since his call to the presidency at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 2012, Nieman has guided the seminary through financial strain, evolving church dynamics, and a shifting academic landscape. He did so while embracing innovative approaches to governance, education, and strategies for long-term institutional

sustainability. For over a dozen years, his thoughtful but decisive leadership has steadied the seminary and created a framework for stability and growth.

Reflecting on the earliest days of his presidency, Nieman recalls, “I faced a school saturated with anxiety and reactivity, so we quickly needed to rebuild a sense of calm, confidence, and care.”

Nieman’s presidency began amid financial

uncertainty for LSTC, a challenge faced by seminaries and institutions of higher education across the country. In 2014, the school’s accreditors raised concerns about LSTC’s long-term sustainability and governance structure, and other issues derived from these deficiencies. Nieman responded to their questions with a decade-long strategy dedicated to improving institutional governance,

James Nieman has been president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago since 2012.





President James Nieman (right) walks with Vice President for Finance and Operations Richard Vivian.



**LSTC HAS ALWAYS EQUIPPED PEOPLE TO LEAD IN A CHANGING WORLD. WHAT WE'VE DONE WITH THE PUBLIC CHURCH CURRICULUM IS ENSURE THAT OUR STUDENTS CAN ENGAGE WITH THE ISSUES OF JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD.**

JAMES NIEMAN

ensuring financial sustainability, elevating institutional branding and committing to adaptability.

**CHANGE IN BOARD GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE**

One of Nieman's first steps was to address institutional governance. At the time, the LSTC board of directors needed restructuring to better reflect the diversity and expertise necessary for long-term success. Nieman led efforts to create a leaner, more diverse, engaged, and proactive board—one capable of playing an active role in financial planning, institutional mission and vision, and strategic decision-making.

"It wasn't enough for our board to be a governing body. They needed to be partners

in navigating the future of theological education," Nieman explained.

Nieman's restructuring efforts fostered greater unity within the institution, allowed for more flexible and agile institutional planning, and led to a comparable reorganization of staff structures.

Today, LSTC's board of directors is comprised of 17 members, down from 30. Nearly half of the new board members can be characterized as historically underrepresented, in terms of racial or ethnic identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

**THE PUBLIC CHURCH CURRICULUM AND INSTITUTIONAL REBRANDING**

In addition to addressing structural concerns,

Nieman was also focused on reinventing the core of LSTC's educational mission. His goal was to create a curriculum that spoke directly to the evolving needs of both the church and society.

Nieman was a catalyst for the faculty development of the Public Church curriculum, a groundbreaking masters-level degree program that aimed to equip students not only for familiar congregational ministry but also for public leadership and social engagement. The curriculum, with its emphasis on justice, equity, and public engagement, has become a hallmark of the seminary's identity.

The Public Church curriculum positions LSTC as a seminary engaged in the pressing social issues

of the day and has helped the school stand out in a crowded field of theological institutions. Courses range from a theological examination of systemic racism to the intersections of faith and public life.

The scope of courses offered allows students to engage their theological education with a variety of vocational pathways, from congregational leadership to advocacy and public policy.

"LSTC has always equipped people to lead in a changing world," said Nieman. "What we've done with the Public Church curriculum is ensure that our students can engage with the issues of justice and community shaping the future of the church and the world."

The success of the Public

Church curriculum is evident in the students it attracts. The seminary draws students from a wide array of backgrounds, including those passionate about social justice, advocacy, and public ministry.

As part of his broader vision, Nieman led a comprehensive rebranding process, making the Public Church curriculum the cornerstone of LSTC's identity. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago brand reflects the seminary's mission and its longstanding dedication to the good news of Jesus Christ, social justice, global engagement, and intellectual rigor.

A new brandmark was developed, containing several symbols that together form a unique whole: the world, the

many pathways to, through, and beyond LSTC, the cross and the Trinity, openness to new ideas, and the blessing of LSTC's diverse community.

It embodies the complexity and wholeness of the community, accompanied by the tagline, "Called into the World." By reimagining the seminary's mission, vision, values, and core marks, Nieman positioned LSTC uniquely within the theological landscape, strengthening its reputation and attracting a diverse, socially engaged student body.

**THE RETURN OF CODEX 1424: A DEFINING MORAL MOMENT**

In 2016, Nieman and LSTC made international headlines when the seminary returned a rare ninth-century Greek

New Testament manuscript to its rightful home at the Monastery of Panagia Eikosiphoinissa near Drama in northern Greece. The manuscript, Codex 1424, was legally acquired by the president of one of the seminary's predecessor institutions and LSTC had ownership of the document for nearly a century.

The decision to return the manuscript was significant not only for the field of biblical scholarship but also as a moral stance. Nieman and LSTC could have legally kept the manuscript but chose instead to pursue what they believed to be a more ethical course.

At the time of the return, Nieman explained, "We didn't have to return this





Assistant to the President Patti DeBias speaks with President James Nieman.

book; we wanted to. The desire to live in a reality of grace and peace drove us to do what was right.”

The return of the codex garnered significant attention from scholars and religious leaders around the world. For Nieman, it was a defining moment in his leadership, one that emphasized the importance of moral integrity and justice in LSTC’s mission.

**A MORAL SEMINARY**

LSTC also made significant strides in addressing issues of race and equity during Nieman’s tenure. Following the Standing Rock Sioux and Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent nationwide

reckoning around race and policing, LSTC was forced to examine its own structures and practices around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Under Nieman’s guidance, the seminary appointed a Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in 2021, an important step in ensuring that issues of race, gender, and justice remain central to LSTC’s mission.

The DEIJ director, along with the newly formed Antiracism Transformation Team, continue the work of bringing systemic change to the seminary. These efforts include changes in curriculum, hiring practices, and student support, with the goal of fostering a more inclusive and equitable

environment for all. LSTC’s commitment to these issues helped the seminary become a more welcoming space for students of color, LGBTQIA+ students and allies, and others from historically marginalized communities.

**A BOLD MOVE:**

**RELOCATING LSTC’S CAMPUS**  
In 2020, the global pandemic compelled LSTC, like many institutions, to rethink its operations. As the world moved to Zoom and other digital spaces for interaction, the need to maintain a massive physical facility designed decades earlier for in person learners became unnecessary. Consequently, in 2023, LSTC negotiated the sale of its 56-year-old campus and relocated to

a shared facility in Hyde Park owned by Catholic Theological Union, later being joined by McCormick Theological Seminary.

The strategic decision to relocate by Nieman and the board of directors was both a practical move of stewardship and one that ensured LSTC’s long-term sustainability. Sharing facilities with peer institutions has not only reduced operational expenses but also fostered a vibrant, ecumenical learning environment.

Emerging from LSTC’s plan to decrease its physical footprint was a plan to expand the seminary’s digital footprint.

President Nieman’s pledge to lead an adaptive seminary

has been realized in the form of Project Starling, LSTC’s new asynchronous learning initiative designed to deliver theological resources to a global audience.

The project, championed and named by Nieman in reference to how a murmuration of starlings executes rapid change through close alignment, is set to launch in 2025. Project Starling is another reflection of Nieman’s deep understanding of the changing landscape of education and the church and the evolving role of technology in education. It reflects a deep desire to make theological education more widely available to more kinds of people in ways that are affordable and equitable.

As Nieman concludes his call as president, the full measure of his legacy is clear. His leadership, combined with the collective efforts of LSTC’s staff, faculty, and

board, culminated in a major milestone: the reaffirmation of LSTC’s dual accreditation by both the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in 2024. This achievement is a testament to the success of Nieman’s decade-long strategy and the institution’s resilience.

Nieman’s retirement will be deeply felt by those who worked alongside him. His legacy goes beyond programs and structures—it is about the culture of faith and purpose he cultivated at LSTC.

“Theological education will always be important because it raises significant questions of meaning, justice, and community, all in light of the good news of Jesus Christ,” Nieman said. “Our job is to ensure that LSTC remains a place where those questions and faith commitments can be explored in ways that speak to today’s world.”



**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION WILL ALWAYS BE IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT RAISES SIGNIFICANT QUESTIONS OF MEANING, JUSTICE, AND COMMUNITY, ALL IN LIGHT OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST. OUR JOB IS TO ENSURE THAT LSTC REMAINS A PLACE WHERE THOSE QUESTIONS AND FAITH COMMITMENTS CAN BE EXPLORED IN WAYS THAT SPEAK TO TODAY’S WORLD.**

JAMES NIEMAN



President James Nieman speaks with Ph.D. candidate student Wu Mee, Th.M. '24.



# ON THE WAY

## LSTC's New Strategic Plan for 2024-2029

By Rev. Erik Christensen

Reflecting on all that LSTC has come through in recent years—navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, selling our former main facility, and relocating to our new home—I'm reminded of the story in Luke 24:13-35. In this passage, two disciples, their hopes dashed, walk the road to Emmaus, recounting the events of

Jesus' crucifixion. In their sorrow, they say, "but we had hoped" that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. Those words, "but we had hoped," echo the feelings of so many today, both within and beyond the church. We had hoped our churches would thrive, that our institutions would remain vital, and that the way we've always done things would continue to serve us well.

The Emmaus story begins with grief but doesn't end in despair. Even though the disciples don't recognize him at first, the risen Jesus meets them on the way, walking with them in their grief and confusion. It's only later, as they break bread together, that their eyes are opened, and they recognize Jesus in their midst. This moment of revelation reminds us that even in uncertain and

challenging times, God is with us, often revealing new possibilities and offering new life in ways we hadn't imagined.

LSTC's new strategic plan has a working title – "On the way" (Luke 24:32) – that draws inspiration from this powerful story. As we embark on the next five years of our journey, we trust that God is guiding us through a time of transformation and renewal. While much is changing in how we educate church leaders, our mission remains clear: to form visionary leaders who bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

To meet the needs of a rapidly evolving church and society, LSTC has identified four key initiatives that will shape our efforts during the next five years:

1

ASYNCHRONOUS EDUCATION

As the church's needs change, so must the ways we provide theological education. A new approach, dubbed "Project Starling," will allow us to offer robust online learning opportunities, particularly for those who cannot participate in traditional degree programs. By developing on-demand courses and certificate programs available 24/7, we will reduce program location, expense, and duration barriers. This initiative is central to our commitment to reaching a broader and more diverse range of students.

2

PHILANTHROPIC CAMPAIGN

Financial sustainability is essential to our mission. This initiative will focus on expanding LSTC's donor support and funding partnerships. Strengthening these financial foundations will ensure that LSTC has the resources needed to continue offering innovative programs and maintain its leadership in theological education.

3

STAFFING STRATEGY

Our faculty and staff are at the heart of LSTC's work. This initiative will invest in our people, providing ongoing training, mentoring, and professional development while strategically aligning staffing resources with our new initiatives. By focusing on developing the capacity of our staff to live out their work more fully, we can reduce costs while maximizing the strengths of our existing team.

4

POLICY REVIEW

We must ensure that internal policies reflect our values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. In the past, though, we have been unduly relational and so have placed these commitments at risk. This initiative reviews and standardizes policies to create a more consistent and equitable experience for all members of the LSTC community. This is a strategic change toward living into new forms of institutional thriving.

These four initiatives are our response to a changing world. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we may not always know what lies ahead, but we move forward in faith, trusting that God will continue to guide us – "On the way." 🌿



The Ruth and Paul Manz Organ at Blessed Sacrament Church.

# FINDING A NEW HOME

## The Manz Organ is dedicated at a ceremony at Blessed Sacrament

By Keisha Dyson

The historic Ruth and Paul Manz organ, housed at LSTC for almost

20 years, has found a new home at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Seattle, Washington.

The organ was designed

to suit the Augustana Chapel space, and named in gratitude for Paul Manz, artist in residence and Christ Seminary Seminec Professor of Church Music at LSTC from 1983-92, and his wife, Ruth.

Known for its musical excellence, the Manz organ holds a deep legacy at LSTC, contributing to the seminary's liturgical life for many years. Now, its powerful music will play a central role in the life of Blessed Sacrament, where it is set to inspire worshippers for years to come.

After its sale in February 2023, the organ was

successfully installed and dedicated during a special ceremony on September 21, 2024. The event marked the beginning of the church's Manz Organ Series, featuring monthly performances through May 2025.

Representing LSTC at the dedication were Dr. Linda Thomas, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dr. Keith Hampton, Cantor to the Seminary Community. Joining them were LSTC board members Terry Goff and Bridget Jones, who also celebrated this milestone occasion.

The organ's relocation to Blessed Sacrament ensures that its rich sound continues to inspire worship in a vibrant faith community. 🌿



The exterior of Blessed Sacrament Church, now housing the Ruth and Paul Manz Organ.



# LSTC ADVANCEMENT DIARIES: THE ROAD SHOW

By Peter Iversen

At LSTC, our Advancement team has taken their show on the road, literally, to share the exciting updates and new developments happening at LSTC to members of our community around the country. This is the first in a series of behind-the-scenes accounts of how our Advancement team breaks barriers and innovates to support the continued success of our institution.

No, the road show is not a Barnum and Bailey event but a Lutheran thing. The road show is a location-specific fellowship showcasing ways God does amazing things at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. And yes, dear reader, many amazing things are happening at the seminary. We cannot keep these to ourselves.



Members of our community experience LSTC's new classroom environment.

## Early December 2023, Chicago

Imagine early December 2023 in Chicago. The snow. The cold. The Chicago Bears beat the Detroit Lions... again. This time is the birth of the road show. Not ideal, but we were so proud of our new space, which was not quite finished yet.

As a team, the staff began planning months in advance. We had never had an event at our new location. Remember, we had just moved from 55th Street into our right-sized location one mile closer to the lake. Staff, faculty, and students were enjoying our new office space, classrooms, and small group meeting spaces. This space was remarkable and needed to be exhibited to our alumni and friends who care deeply about the future of the seminary.

Staff generated a robust invitee list. Many LSTC alumni, Lutherans, and donors live in greater Chicago. We approached these folks with zeal, knowing they would be excited to see this new space.

We planned an active program. There would be staggered tours, food, and a presentation.

On the day of the first road

show, the tour went well. Few touched the food, and attendees asked fantastic questions that few others than President Nieman could answer. The event went well, but it was clear that to reach a critical mass of people, we would have to go to them.

Philanthropic Engagement Officer Peter Iversen presents during "An Afternoon with LSTC" in Chicago.



LSTC President James Nieman gives a tour of LSTC's rare books room.



## Spring 2024, St. Louis

Now zoom forward to spring, this time in St. Louis: the Missouri Botanical Garden blooms, and the St. Louis Cardinals are back. Staff no longer planned the road show alone, but we worked collaboratively with local Lutheran leaders to plan

an event at the right time and place. They suggested Rev. Rafael Malpica Padilla speak. Less than one year prior, he accepted his appointment as the Damm Chair in Leadership and Director of Latine Ministry and Theology at LSTC. Local leaders provided another helpful suggestion: ask a

recent LSTC graduate leading a St. Louis congregation to begin the meeting in prayer. This advice created an attractive agenda. As a team, we were ready.

The second road show in St. Louis was educational, recreational, and relational. It provided meaning and hope for the future of the seminary system in the United States. We understood

that while the future would not necessarily look like the past, it would be recognizable. God is doing amazing things at LSTC.

The follow-up to this event was a grand 50th anniversary celebration of SEMINEX later that summer. Moreover, the St. Louis attendees asked for an update; they invited us back!



President Nieman addresses the crowd at the North shore road show.

Pastor Erik Christensen at the North Shore road show.



## Fall 2024, Chicago

We are planning a third road show at an ELCA church on the north side. Again, we are working with local Lutheran leaders to create an attractive event where we can showcase

the ways that God is at work among the faculty, students, and staff. There is so much negative news which can often affect our view of our faith, but the road show exists to share with audiences

the bright light that illuminates our seminary.

It is time to talk about the future of our church. It is time to reimagine, reinvent, reaffirm, and renew. If you agree, contact us at [advancement@lstc.edu](mailto:advancement@lstc.edu) to schedule a road show for your community. ✨





# FAR FROM HOME

As conflict persists in Myanmar, Burmese students at LSTC grapple with distance and despair

By Keisha Dyson

The ongoing conflict in Myanmar, which erupted after a military coup in February 2021, continues to have severe consequences for the country's people. LSTC's students from Myanmar are no exception. Wu Mee, Char Laywa, Ji Bu, and M. Seng Tsin Nan, who came to the United States to pursue a theological education at

LSTC, now find themselves struggling with the emotional and spiritual tolls of being far from home while their country is embroiled in violence and political instability.

Myanmar's political turmoil, sparked by a military coup, has plunged the country into chaos, leaving thousands of its citizens dead and

displacing over a million people. Airstrikes, military crackdowns, and targeted attacks have made it nearly impossible for people in rural areas to communicate with the outside world, creating a chilling sense of isolation.

These challenges are nothing new for Ji Bu. Growing up in Northern Shan State, conflicts between military and ethnic groups

were a constant presence for the first-year master of theology student.

"I grew up in a war zone," she said, describing a community frequently targeted by military raids and torture. The airstrikes have continued to intensify, forcing families to flee with just the clothes on their backs.

"People cannot get food or start school," Ji Bu explained, "My heart aches when I watch news from home, knowing our people are suffering."

#### THE EMOTIONAL TOLL OF DISTANCE

Being away from their families during such a turbulent time has taken a profound emotional



toll on LSTC's Burmese students. Communication with loved ones has become nearly impossible. The military's destruction of communication towers cut off internet and phone access in rural areas, leaving first-year master of theology student Char Laywa unable to speak to her family for months at a time.

For Laywa, a student from Kachin State, the silence has been agonizing.

"Before, I could talk to them," says Laywa, "But now, I don't know when the phone lines will be open, if at all."

The isolation has been made worse by a constant worry for her mother, who lives with health issues.

"My mother only has one kidney, and I worry every day whether she's getting the care she needs," Laywa said.

Despite her anxiety, she finds solace in her faith. Quoting from 2 Chronicles 20:15, she said, "The battle is not mine, but God's."

Wu Mee, a Ph.D. candidate in Theology, shares similar sentiments. Originally from Mogok, Wu Mee feels the weight of being far from her large family. She has seven siblings, and grapples with a nagging guilt as she continues her studies in relative comfort.

"How can I study, eat, and sleep when my family cannot do those things?" she asks, expressing the tension between her personal academic goals and the suffering she knows her family endures.

For M. Seng Tsin Nan, a Ph.D. candidate in Biblical Theology (New Testament), being cut off from home has been equally distressing. Growing up in Myanmar, Seng Tsin was accustomed to the instability of a region long marked by ethnic

conflict, but the past few years have been especially brutal.

"It's not just about the fighting," Seng Tsin shared. "It's about the complete lack of security."

Due to air assaults, her family has relocated for safety reasons. Like her peers, Seng Tsin describes the frustration of not being able to reach them, constantly wondering if they are safe or if they have had to flee. She hopes her academic pursuits at LSTC will help in her future work with communities in Myanmar.

For these students, the conflict in Myanmar is not just a political or humanitarian issue—it is a deeply spiritual struggle. Wu Mee described how she turns to prayer whenever the burden of worry becomes overwhelming.

Inspired by Psalm 46:10, which calls on believers to "be still and know that I am God," she meditates on this passage for strength.

"It has not been easy to be still during this time," she admits. "But I ask God for strength every day."

Similarly, Char has questioned God's purpose in allowing such suffering but ultimately finds peace in her faith, believing that her country is in God's hands.

Seng Tsin shares how difficult it is to reconcile the suffering of her people with her studies but believes that faith plays an integral role in enduring these hardships.

"In times like this, I remind myself that suffering has always been part of our story as Christians," she said. "The witness of those overcoming suffering in the Bible encourages my trust and hope in God."

Throughout their time at LSTC, these Burmese students have found comfort

and assistance from the seminary community. Pastor Erik Christensen, who served the community for the past seven years, has made a concerted effort to ensure the students feel seen and supported.

Christensen has created worship spaces for them to express their grief and share their struggles, offering prayers and letters of comfort. For Ji Bu, these gestures have made all the difference.

"Pastor Erik's prayers and letters make me feel less alone," she said. "They lift my burdens."

Beyond spiritual aid, the practical assistance provided by LSTC has also been crucial. The school's international student coordinator, Marvis Hardy, has been instrumental in helping the students access resources like campus jobs and scholarships, which are vital to their financial stability during this tumultuous time.

Additionally, the students receive understanding and care from their academic advisors. Dr. Marvin Wickware, one of LSTC's faculty members, regularly checks in with Burmese students, offering academic and personal guidance as they navigate the dual challenges of their studies and the crisis back home.

"He cares about more than just my coursework," Ji Bu, an advisee of Wickware, shared. "He's concerned about my family, my country, and how I'm holding up."

#### **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: HOPES FOR MYANMAR AND BEYOND**

Despite the difficulties they face, the students remain hopeful—not just for their own futures, but for the future of Myanmar. Each

of them expressed a deep desire to return home and use their education to rebuild their communities once the conflict ends.

For Char, her hope is that Myanmar will one day find peace so that she can return to her family and contribute to the restoration of her homeland.

"I want to go back and share what I've learned here," she said. "I want to serve."

Meanwhile, Wu Mee is focused on completing her Ph.D. and using her knowledge to serve her people in whatever way God leads her. She dreams of reuniting with her mother, whom she hasn't seen in years, and longs for the day when she can hold her in her arms again.

#### **A CALL FOR SUPPORT**

The students are grateful for the care they've received but emphasize the need for continued prayers, international awareness, and financial assistance. They hope their stories will inspire people in the U.S. to pay closer attention to the crisis in Myanmar, which often feels overlooked in global conversations.

"We need your help, not just financially, but emotionally and spiritually," Ji Bu said. "Please don't forget us. Our future generation depends on us making our country a better place."

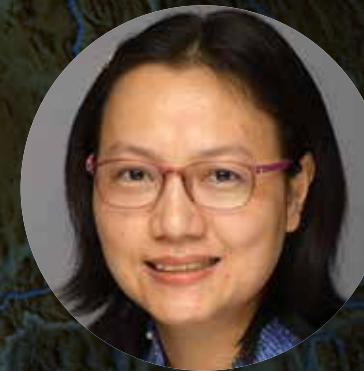
As Myanmar's conflict continues, the resilience of LSTC's Burmese students serves as a powerful reminder of the strength of the human spirit. Through their faith, their community, and their commitment to education, they hold on to hope for a brighter future for their homeland—one that they are determined to help rebuild. 🌱



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**WE NEED YOUR HELP, NOT JUST FINANCIALLY, BUT EMOTIONALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. PLEASE DON'T FORGET US. OUR FUTURE GENERATION DEPENDS ON US MAKING OUR COUNTRY A BETTER PLACE.**

Ji BU, FIRST-YEAR MASTER OF THEOLOGY STUDENT



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**BEFORE, I COULD TALK TO [MY FAMILY,] BUT NOW, I DON'T KNOW WHEN THE PHONE LINES WILL BE OPEN, IF AT ALL... MY MOTHER ONLY HAS ONE KIDNEY, AND I WORRY EVERY DAY WHETHER SHE'S GETTING THE CARE SHE NEEDS.**

CHAR LAYWA, FIRST-YEAR MASTER OF THEOLOGY STUDENT



“

**HOW CAN I STUDY, EAT, AND SLEEP WHEN MY FAMILY CANNOT DO THOSE THINGS? ... IT HAS NOT BEEN EASY TO BE STILL DURING THIS TIME, BUT I ASK GOD FOR STRENGTH EVERY DAY.**

WU MEE, PH.D. CANDIDATE IN THEOLOGY



“

**IN TIMES LIKE THIS, I REMIND MYSELF THAT SUFFERING HAS ALWAYS BEEN PART OF OUR STORY AS CHRISTIANS. THE WITNESS OF THOSE OVERCOMING SUFFERING IN THE BIBLE ENCOURAGES MY TRUST AND HOPE IN GOD.**

M. SENG TSIN NAN, PH.D. CANDIDATE IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY (NEW TESTAMENT)





## Marlene Miloch nurtures future leaders of the Church through generosity and faith

By Keisha Dyson

**M**arlene Lynor Miloch (pronounced MY lock) was a longtime supporter of theological education and believed in nurturing future leaders of the Church.

A steadfast supporter of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Marlene has left an indelible mark on the seminary with a generous bequest of over \$650,000, a remarkable estate gift directed towards the LSTC annual fund.

Critical to LSTC's mission, the annual fund provides unrestricted operating support that enables the seminary to offer transformative educational opportunities, foster the next generation of ministers, and respond flexibly to the immediate needs of the institution.

Marlene's bequest allows LSTC to continue shaping the Church's future, a cause close

to her heart.

Throughout her life, Marlene faithfully contributed to LSTC, donating a total of \$2,600 to the seminary. Since 2008, she dedicated up to \$150 each year to the annual fund. Her estate gift, however, is a profound expression of her enduring belief in the seminary's work and solidifies her legacy of generosity.

Beyond her financial contributions, Marlene was known for her deep faith and lifelong devotion to the Church. Her sister, Patti Phillips, recalls a young Marlene who had once aspired to become a minister.

While her career ultimately took a different direction, her passion for ministry never waned. Marlene became a devoted member of All Saints Lutheran Church in Palatine, Illinois, where she was an indispensable volunteer.

Pastor Jenn Moland-Kovash, who has led All Saints since 2004, remembers Marlene as a steadfast and hardworking member of the congregation—a "first-in, last-out" kind of volunteer who gave tirelessly to her community.

"Having Marlene as a member of the congregation meant having someone who lived out their faith in lots of ways," Pastor Moland-Kovash recalled. "From making coffee on Sunday mornings to raising ideas for ministry and partnership with the wider church."

Marlene's devotion to the church was not limited to physical acts of service; her spiritual existence was equally rich. Patti remembers moments they spent together in prayer and devotion. Whether in Illinois or Missouri, Marlene would always begin the day with scripture readings and deep discussions about faith. She would use a tape recorder to listen to and reflect on the scriptures, nurturing her relationship with God.

In her retirement, Marlene further demonstrated her dedication by completing the Diakonia program, a lay leadership initiative within the Metro Chicago Synod. This experience exemplified her unwavering commitment to deepening her faith and contributing to the spiritual heartbeat of her community.

In 2009, Marlene moved from Chicago to Shell Knob, Missouri. There, she continued to live out her faith, a great source of

comfort and strength, during her final challenging year when she faced cancer with grace and determination.

Marlene passed away on May 12, 2024, at the age of 73, leaving behind a lifetime of love, service, and devotion.

Marlene's abundant bequest to LSTC ensures her commitment to theological education and the formation of church leaders will endure. Her gift will provide future generations of students the spiritual and academic resources necessary to lead faith communities with stability and wisdom.

LSTC celebrates Marlene Miloch and we give thanks for her enduring generosity, her steadfast faith, and her unwavering belief in the importance of equipping leaders for the Church's future.

Marlene's memory lives on in the hearts of those she touched, and her legacy will continue to inspire others to follow in her footsteps. ✨

### CONSIDER LEAVING A LASTING LEGACY

If you are interested in including the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in your estate plans, your bequest will help support future generations of church leaders. By leaving a gift to LSTC, you can make a meaningful impact on theological education and ensure the continuation of our mission to form faithful, compassionate ministers for years to come.

To learn more about how you can leave a bequest, or to explore other planned giving options, please contact Ariana Strahl in the the Office of Advancement at [ariana.strahl@lstc.edu](mailto:ariana.strahl@lstc.edu). ✨

# A GIFT TO THE GENERATIONS



# TRANSFORMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Project Starling set to launch in 2025

By Keisha Dyson



Theological education is on the brink of transformation with the launch of Project Starling set for spring 2025. This innovative digital learning platform is designed to serve a wide range of learners, offering high-quality theological resources (think courses) and modules (think lessons).

To design the modules, LSTC has partnered with an instructional design company, Noodle, to ensure the courses are built using best practices in online pedagogy, creating an

engaging and transformative learning experience. By integrating multimedia, interactive activities, and assessments, the instructional design team will help Project Starling cater to various learning styles. This collaboration is crucial for enabling the platform to scale globally while maintaining a high standard of academic rigor and spiritual integrity.

Leading this exciting new initiative is Keisha Dyson, recently appointed as Vice President of Enterprise Innovation. Dyson's appointment brings fresh

energy and direction to the project. With her extensive leadership experience and visionary approach, Dyson is well-equipped to guide Project Starling through its launch and beyond. "I am thrilled to take on this role at such a transformative time," Dyson shared. "Project Starling represents a unique opportunity to reshape how we think about theological education, making it accessible to all who seek it."

In 2025, Project Starling will roll out its first three resources, authored by Dr. Marvin Wickware, Dr. Peter Vethanayagamony, and The

Rev. Craig Mueller. Each faculty member brings a wealth of expertise, ensuring that these initial courses will be both academically rigorous and practically applicable.

Dr. Marvin Wickware, Associate Professor of Church and Society and Ethics, will offer a course that explores the intersection of faith and justice, drawing on his deep expertise in ethics and theology. Designed for faith leaders and activists, this course will equip learners with practical and reflective tools to build just and compassionate communities

while addressing the moral challenges of our time.

Dr. Peter Vethanayagamony, Professor of Modern Church History, will provide a course offering global perspectives on Christianity, diving into the rich diversity of Christian practices and beliefs worldwide. By engaging with Christianity from a cross-cultural viewpoint, learners will deepen their understanding of the global church, moving beyond Western-centric perspectives.

The Rev. Craig Mueller, Pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and LSTC auxiliary faculty, will guide learners in spiritual

formation. This is an invaluable resource for those looking to deepen their spiritual practices.

The platform's modular structure allows learners to engage with individual lessons or larger courses, making it highly flexible and customizable for each user's unique learning journey. This means that learners can tailor their experience to meet their specific academic or professional needs.

Whether it's for ministers, lay leaders, spiritual seekers, or professionals working in non-profits and hospitals, Project Starling provides

academic-style courses led by expert faculty. With programs for certification, professional development, and/or personal development, the platform is expected to become a go-to resource for those seeking spiritual and theological education.

As Project Starling gears up for its official launch in 2025, it stands as a testament to LSTC's commitment to providing innovative and inclusive theological education. ✨

*Funding for Project Starling is made possible through generous donor support.*



## CRAIG MUELLER: LEADING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Craig Mueller, an experienced pastor, spiritual director, and auxiliary faculty member at LSTC, is bringing his parish ministry experience and passion for spiritual formation to Project Starling. With over three decades of experience in ministry, Craig is known for his ability to connect spirituality, preaching, and worship with everyday life. As part of Project Starling, Craig is developing a course focused on *spiritual formation*. This course is designed to equip church leaders, students, and laity with the tools and practices needed to enrich their ministries and their spiritual lives.

Craig Mueller shares his vision for the course, the inspiration behind it, and how it fits within the broader mission of Project Starling.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 21





## PETER VETHANAYAGAMONY: EXPLORING CHURCH HISTORY

**A**mong the many exciting courses being developed is “Church’s Witness: A Survey of Church History,” led by Professor Peter Vethanayagamony. In this Q&A, Professor Vethanayagamony shares insights into his course, its scope, and its potential impact on both lay leaders and the wider community. Known for his passion for church history and education, Vethanayagamony’s course will provide a deep dive into the evolution of Christianity over the past 2,000 years, offering students an opportunity to learn from the church’s triumphs and mistakes.

**Q** Can you tell us about the resource you are developing and what learners can expect?

**A** The course is titled *Church’s Witness: A*

*Survey of Church History.* It’s an overview of major developments in Christianity over the past 2,000 years. The course will guide students through significant historical, theological, and ethical shifts that have shaped the church as we know it today. We’ll explore how Christian worship, theology, leadership, and liturgical practices have evolved, as well as examine the church’s interactions with culture and other religions. Ultimately, the aim is for students to understand the heritage they’ve inherited and where their faith stands in today’s world.

**Q** Who is this course primarily designed for?

**A** This course is primarily designed for TEEM students—those training to become ministers through alternative paths in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). However,

it is accessible to lay ministers and other learners who want to deepen their understanding of church history without committing to a full seminary program. That being said, I think it could be beneficial to many people in the church who want to understand their faith’s history, especially those in leadership roles. There’s potential for adult education in congregations, but it would depend on how it’s adapted. Beyond the church, the lessons on the history of marginalization, for instance, could be valuable to people outside of theological circles, including politicians or social activists.

**Q** You mentioned lessons from the church’s past. Could you elaborate on some of the significant lessons students will take away from the course?

**A** The course will help students debunk several

myths, such as recognizing and understanding that Christianity is a global religion, not merely a Western or Euro-American “white” religion. It will also highlight that Christianity in parts of Asia and Africa predates its presence in Europe and is not simply a remnant of European colonialism.

One key focus is learning from the church’s past mistakes. For instance, we examine the Crusades in the Middle Ages and the harm they caused to Christian-Muslim relations, as well as to the Eastern Christian communities. We also study colonialism’s impact on indigenous populations in the Americas. The course doesn’t shy away from these darker chapters in the church’s history. The goal is to encourage students to reflect on how we, as the church, can acknowledge and repent for past mistakes while

working to ensure history doesn’t repeat itself.

There’s a famous quote by Maya Angelou that I often reference: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” That’s the heart of what we’re trying to achieve in this course—educating ministers of the gospel to confront the mistakes of the past so that they can lead with awareness and sensitivity today.

**Q** That’s such a profound lesson. What excites you most about designing this course for Project Starling?

**A** What excites me is the opportunity to reach beyond the traditional seminary classroom. This course offers people, whether they’re lay ministers or leaders in other capacities, the chance to engage with the church’s history in a

meaningful way. It’s a privilege to provide training that equips leaders with a deeper understanding of their faith and history. Additionally, I’m excited about the potential reach of this course, although there are still unknowns about how far it might go and who will be able to access it.

**Q** You’ve touched on a few challenges. Could you elaborate on some of the difficulties you’ve encountered in developing this course?

**A** One of the main challenges is the scope of the material. Church history is vast, and this course attempts to cover a lot of ground. We are tasked with giving students an overall picture of major developments, but deciding what to include and what to leave out is not easy. Also, this is a certificate-level course,

and I’m still trying to adjust the content to match the audience’s level of understanding. Another challenge is that the mode of delivery is new for many of us. We’re still figuring out how to effectively deliver this content online and ensure that learning objectives are met.

**Q** Is there anything else you’d like to share about the course?

**A** Right now, it’s a work in progress. I think this course has the potential to make a meaningful impact on ministers, lay leaders, and others interested in learning about the church’s history. But as we continue developing it, there are still some challenges to work through, especially in terms of content scope and delivery method. Hopefully, as things progress, we’ll be able to refine the course and reach a broader audience. ✨

**Q** Tell us a bit about the course you’re designing for the Project Starling Platform.

**A** The course I’m developing focuses on broad themes in spirituality such as prayer, discernment, liberation, wellness, embodiment, and nature. Each module also includes a spiritual practice such as journaling, lectio divina, centering prayer, the Enneagram, and spiritual direction. The course will be designed for those in ministry programs in an asynchronous format, and for lifelong learners to engage the material for their own spiritual enrichment. The required spiritual formation course for master’s students at LSTC has been well received, and I am eager to curate the various modules for a wider audience.

**Q** What inspired you to focus on spiritual formation?

**A** I first began receiving spiritual direction in my 20s and since then I have had a spiritual director through all the seasons of my life. I was trained as a spiritual director in the 1990s and began offering spiritual formation offerings at LSTC in 2009. Spiritual formation is a wonderful complement to the public church emphasis at LSTC. I have also offered retreats, spirituality groups, and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23





## MARVIN WICKWARE: EQUIPPING LEADERS FOR PUBLIC CHURCH

**D**r. Marvin Wickware, Associate Professor of Church and Society and Ethics at LSTC, is creating an exciting learning resource for Project Starling, LSTC's new online theological education platform. His resource builds on the core principles of the public church curriculum, which emphasizes the integration of church and society, calling students to understand themselves as leaders who engage with their communities for the common good.

Dr. Wickware shares insights into the resource he's developing, how it equips learners with practical tools for transformative leadership, and how Project Starling broadens access to theological education beyond traditional seminary walls.

**Q** Tell us about the resource you are developing for Project Starling.

**A** The module I'm developing is based on the Public Church course I teach, which focuses on helping learners understand that the church and broader society are intimately connected. The church doesn't exist in isolation; it's part of the world, and the world's gifts and challenges flow into the church. If the church isn't engaged with the surrounding community, there's something wrong. This learning resource equips learners with tools to understand that relationship and develop leadership skills to seek justice and transformation in their communities.

**Q** What are the key themes of this resource?

**A** There are three main elements. First, we explore the idea of the church as part of society—how it interacts with the world, takes on its struggles, and shares its gifts. Second, the module helps learners understand themselves

as public church leaders. Whether or not they are in formal leadership roles, they are responsible for the well-being of their communities. Third, we give them practical tools, such as ethnographic observation and community organizing methods, to identify needs in their community and work toward meaningful change.

**Q** Who do you envision as the audience for this resource?

**A** The course is for anyone who understands the church as a potential force for good but isn't sure how to connect that vision to action. It could be longtime pastors seeking tools to engage their congregations in community work, or organizers who aren't necessarily churchgoers but want to partner with churches in social change efforts. It's also for laypeople who want to understand what leadership looks like outside of formal church roles. My hope is that all of these learners will understand themselves as capable leaders in bridging the gap between church and society.

**Q** How does this resource fit into the larger vision of Project Starling?

**A** This resource is foundational for Project Starling because it's all about understanding the community you're in and figuring out what work the church should be doing there. Project Starling broadens access to theological education, so learners don't need to be in a traditional seminary setting to benefit. This resource is highly practical and allows learners to integrate their other studies—whether it's New Testament, spiritual formation, or church history—into real-world contexts for transformative action.

**Q** What excites you most about being part of Project Starling?

**A** I'm excited about the opportunity to reach a broader audience beyond the students who enroll in my seminary classes. Through Project Starling, we can connect with people who might not have the time or resources to pursue a traditional degree but still

want to be part of the church's transformative work in society. I'm also excited about working with instructional designers from Noodle, who bring fresh perspectives on how to teach these concepts in a more engaging and measurable way. It's been great to refine my teaching approach and make it even more effective.

**Q** How do you see Project Starling advancing the mission of the public church?

**A** The Public Church curriculum was always about taking the walls off the church and connecting it with the community. Project Starling takes that mission further by making theological education accessible to as many people as possible. It allows us to expand the reach of these ideas and equip more people to engage in the work of justice, advocacy, and community transformation. In many ways, it feels like we're living out the mission of going out into the world and preaching the gospel in a very practical, relevant way. ✚

"samplers" of spiritual practices throughout my parish ministry as well. It is exciting to provide opportunities for people to deepen their spiritual journeys, both as individuals and within communities of faith.

**Q** Tell us a little about the structure of the course. What can learners expect?

**A** The course is structured around a series of modules, each focusing on a different aspect of spirituality. Learners will engage with videos, readings, spiritual practices, and journal reflections. Several inventories assist learners to determine their unique spiritual path and to gauge their overall sense of wellness.

**Q** What are some of the key challenges you've faced while developing your module, and how have you worked to overcome them?

**A** One of the most appreciated components of the synchronous spiritual formation course is the small group experience. Each week students process the readings and practices in a supportive community of five or six students. I have needed to consider other ways for learners to reflect and interact in an asynchronous course. I am grateful for the coaching and support provided by LSTC and Noodle, the organization helping LSTC design online content.

**Q** What do you hope learners take away from this course?

**A** Whether preparing for public ministry or taking the course for personal enrichment, I hope the course will be a journey of self-reflection for learners. By experiencing a wide diversity of spiritual practices, each learner will determine which are a good fit for them and which ones nurture their body, mind, and soul. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on practices that honor the earth and bring liberation and healing to the world.

**Q** What excites you most about contributing to Project Starling?

**A** As an alum of LSTC I have a long connection with seminary. I am excited about the opportunity and challenge of providing theological education for the next generation of learners including those taking courses as lifelong learners. Though there are technological challenges, I am most excited about the element of creativity in this endeavor. There are also initial conversations about LSTC providing a spiritual direction training program in the coming years. The modules we are designing now will be core content for such a program that will draw on LSTC's unique emphasis on justice and inclusivity and its ecumenical, interfaith context. ✚



Dr. Keith "Doc" Hampton leads the LSTC Gospel Choir.



LSTC students gather for a dinner church event.



The LSTC community celebrates the 2024 Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium: "This is My Story."



Sweetry Noverlinda, Wu Me, and Venesia Hutabarat celebrate graduation at LSTC in 2024.

President James Nieman meets with a representative from the China Christian Council/Three Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church, which sent a delegation to visit CTU, LSTC, and MTS on August 29, 2024.



Dr. Christian Scharen Associate Professor and Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship with LSTC Ph.D. student Immanuel Karunakaran, Th.M '24.



Staff members from LSTC, CTU, and MTS gather outside LSTC's chapel for the 2nd Annual Staff Meet and Greet.



Director of A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice Sara Trumm leads students on a visit to the American Islamic College.



New students take a tour of LSTC guided by Scott Chalmers, Dean of Student Services.



LSTC students gather in the entryway of our new campus location.



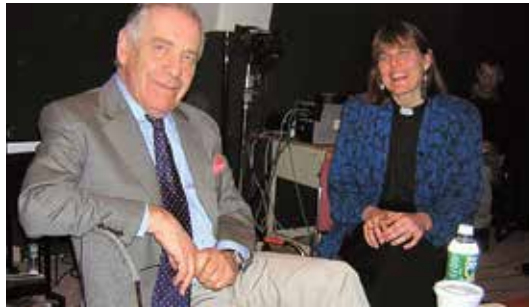
Incoming students gather together to celebrate the start of a new academic year.



Pastor to the Community Erik Christensen, who served at LSTC for seven years.



CBS News' Morley Safer interviewed Barbara Rossing in 2004 for CBS Sixty Minutes segment "The Greatest Story Ever Sold" (cbsnews.com/news/the-greatest-story-ever-sold/), about her book *The Rapture Exposed*, critiquing the *Left Behind* novels.



DR. BARBARA ROSSING

# HONORING AN ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER

By Esther Menn

After 30 years of teaching New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Barbara Rossing's final class brought her to a very special place: the Island of Patmos. Long associated with the Book of Revelation, Rossing's area of expertise, she traveled to the remote location in May of 2024 with the World of the Bible Travel Seminar to Türkiye and Greece.

"It was my first time visiting Patmos," says Rossing. "I was moved by the natural beauty and holiness of this site, revered for centuries as the place where John received his revelation. It seemed so appropriate to be there, sharing with beloved alumni, friends, family and students, as a culmination of decades of studying the Apocalypse."

Rossing answered her call to theological education by joining the LSTC faculty in 1994. Over her thirty-year career, she taught New Testament courses on Jesus, the Gospels, and Judaism, the Life and Letters of Paul, Preaching the Gospel of John (co-taught with a ministerial arts faculty member),

Ecological Hermeneutics, Eschatology (co-taught with Vitor Westhelle), and, of course, Revelation.

Rossing recalls with amusement how after the publication of her well-received book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, the students in her Revelation class surprised her.

"During a break, the students draped their clothes on their chairs and left their shoes behind," she said. "They didn't return when it was time to resume class. They made it look like the rapture had happened, and I was 'left behind!'"

Rossing's interest in the New Testament has always dovetailed with her commitment to addressing pressing social concerns, especially themes of environmental health and justice.

She directed the LSTC

environmental emphasis, mentoring students passionate about the earth's future, even organizing a conference at LSTC in 2019 on "Educating for Climate Justice" where she gathered faculty and administrators from seminaries across the country.

Rossing's abiding concern for creation also motivated her to get involved in the Zygon Center for the Study of Religion and Science, and to serve on the board of the Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science.

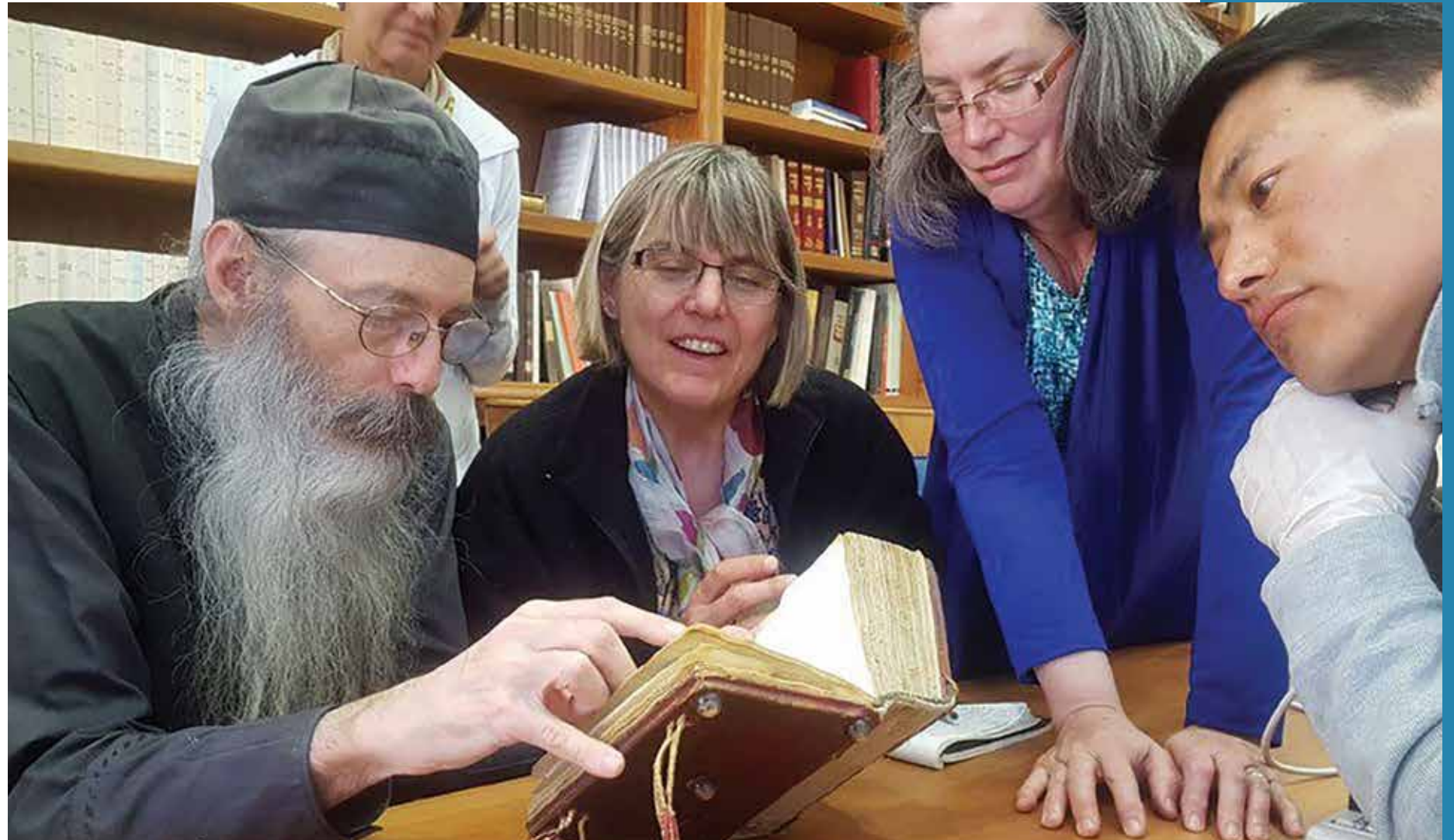
She was key to the ELCA's stance on the ordination of gay and lesbian pastors in committed relationships. Leading up to the 2009 sexuality decision, Dr. Rossing and

fellow LSTC Old Testament professor Dr. Ralph Klein joined forces to author a public statement, organized hundreds of professors and

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**I WAS A MEMBER OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE WHEN I SPOKE TO THE ASSEMBLY PLENARY IN MINNEAPOLIS, IN FAVOR OF FULL INCLUSION. I WILL NEVER FORGET THAT VOTE OR THE GRATITUDE OF LSTC STUDENTS AND SO MANY OTHERS.**

BARBARA ROSSING



At the library of St Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, Egypt, in 2018, Father Justin shows an 8th century Arabic biblical manuscript to LSTC PhD student Yoseob Song and Professors Barbara Rossing and Esther Menn.

theologians to support the statement, and led Bible studies examining biblical texts often used polemically in this debate.

"I was a member of the Lutheran World Federation executive committee when I spoke to the assembly plenary in Minneapolis, in favor of full inclusion," Rossing remembers. "I will never forget that vote or the gratitude of LSTC students and so many others."

Rossing has long been a public speaker in high

demand. She was interviewed by Morley Safer on "CBS 60 Minutes" following the publication of her book, *The Rapture Exposed*, and has appeared on the History Channel, Living the Questions, and other media, countering fundamentalist interpretations of Revelation.

Rossing was fulfilled by the vast dimensions of her work, including advocating for women in global church leadership in the Lutheran World Federation, chairing the LWF Theology and Studies Committee, leading climate delegations to the United Nations, and writing Bible Studies for LWF assemblies—most recently on "One Spirit"

for the assembly in Krakow, Poland last year.

In retirement, Rossing plans to continue tracking the success of former students as they make their mark, whether in ordained ministry, teaching positions, global ministries, or other vocations.

Her ongoing writing projects include the *Earth Bible Commentary* on Revelation, focusing on Revelation's world-healing tree of life and an earth-centered eschatology. On Sundays she may be found worshipping or guest-preaching at her home church in Leavenworth, Washington.

She lives in a solar-powered home with her

husband, Lauren Johnson, their cats and many foster kittens. She will continue to accept invitations to synod assemblies and other national and international events.

Though LSTC will dearly miss Rossing's inspired presence in the classroom, Rossing and Hebrew Bible faculty colleague Dr. Esther Menn plan to continue co-leading travel seminars. They are currently planning another World of the Bible Travel Seminar to Türkiye and Greece in May 2026, with a possible add-on to Sinai! (Contact [emenn@lstc.edu](mailto:emenn@lstc.edu) or [rossing@lstc.edu](mailto:rossing@lstc.edu) to express interest.) ❄️



REV. DR. KIM BECKMANN

# 40 YEARS OF SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

By Mercedes Kane

Rev. Dr. Kim Beckmann is a master weaver of words. Which is why it's no surprise that the homiletics teacher's own story at LSTC, through all its many twists and turns, found a poetic ending in the same place it began: the courtyard of the Lowrey building.

The graduating class of 2023 invited Beckmann to preach at their baccalaureate service and to attend a courtyard party on graduation day. They couldn't have known that their professor had lived at the Lowrey building as a student in the 1980s, but as she turned from the celebration, the students' goodbyes ringing in the air, she could easily summon that young, brave woman with her entire career still before her.

Beckmann grew up in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. She was aware of at least 18 ministerial leaders in her extended family and her own first call was as a fourth grade Lutheran School teacher in Queens. When she made the decision to leave New York City to attend The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, her parents disowned her, believing church leadership was no place for a woman.

"When I drove to Chicago, I knew nobody," Beckmann recalled. "But even though others thought it wasn't possible for me to serve God as I was, I had the conviction and a spirit-led calling, so I struck out to make it happen."

In the more than four decades since, Beckmann has trailblazed a path dedicated to curiosity, inclusion, equity, and justice, with LSTC a cornerstone





both professionally and personally. She met her husband, Fred Kinsey while they were students together at LSTC. They married in 1984, in a campus wedding that doubled as their class graduation party.

The couple worked side-by-side as co-pastors in the Northwoods of the Upper Peninsula at Bethany Lutheran Church in Amasa and Trinity Lutheran Church in Iron River, Michigan from 1987 to 2006. But LSTC never was that far away. During that 20-year ministry, Beckmann returned as a student in the 1990s, while also serving as an alumni board member and chair and remaining a part of the LSTC community in various ways for decades to come.

“LSTC and Hyde Park has always been a place of homecoming and challenge,” Beckmann said. “Both warm, and a place of being stretched and provoked, but held to do it in ways that made me less fragile, and more gritty.”

Beckmann’s talents for writing and teaching continued to be developed in her roles as a practical and constructive theologian, publishing and preaching out of the common and holy spaces of daily life.

In 2006 she took a call into church administration, serving as Director for Candidacy and Women in Ministry in the ELCA. There, she continued to partner with LSTC until the position was eliminated in late 2009.

She served 15 congregations in transitional pastoral ministry roles for over 13 years and became known as both a “transitional specialist” and an inspiring orator. She organized faith leaders for Equality Illinois in the successful effort for marriage equality and served as a member of the Goodsoil

legislative team for ministry policy change and LGBTQIA+ advocacy in the ELCA until 2016.

It was around that time that Beckmann was approached by then-Dean Esther Menn who asked her to step in and teach homiletics for a year while LSTC conducted a faculty search for the position.

Beyond teaching homiletics, Dr. Menn was also hoping Beckmann, who knew LSTC so well, could offer the community the gift of her transitional specialist skills, which included entering and learning systems quickly, dealing with the anger and grief

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**AS A TRANSITION SPECIALIST, I HAVE THE RARE TEMPERAMENT REQUIRED FOR THIS KIND OF WORK. TO LOVE DEEPLY AND LOOSELY, TO MAKE THE MOST OF AND ENTER FULLY INTO WHAT YOU KNOW WILL BE A LIMITED TIMEFRAME, TO EXPECT CHAOS AND BE AS WISE AND GRACEFUL AS POSSIBLE IN DYSFUNCTION IN TRANSITIONAL AND ANXIOUS MOMENTS..**

REV. DR. KIM BECKMANN

transitioning communities are going through, all while holding space and actively assisting them as they move toward their next missional callings.

“As a transition specialist, I have the rare temperament required for this kind of work,” Beckmann explained. “To love deeply and loosely, to make the most of and enter fully into what you know will be a limited timeframe, to expect chaos and be as wise and graceful as possible in dysfunction in transitional and anxious moments.

“This is the ‘value-added’ skill set that was the basis for the asks I began receiving

from Dean Menn,” she concluded. “To fill discrete, bounded, transitional moments in LSTC’s life.”

And while the position itself was “transitional,” Beckmann continued to teach both homiletics and contextual education until 2019, before returning to LSTC in 2022 to teach another two years. Within and beyond her classroom, Beckmann also used her experiences as an early ordained woman in the Church to help model possibility and create an inclusive, justice-driven space for her students.

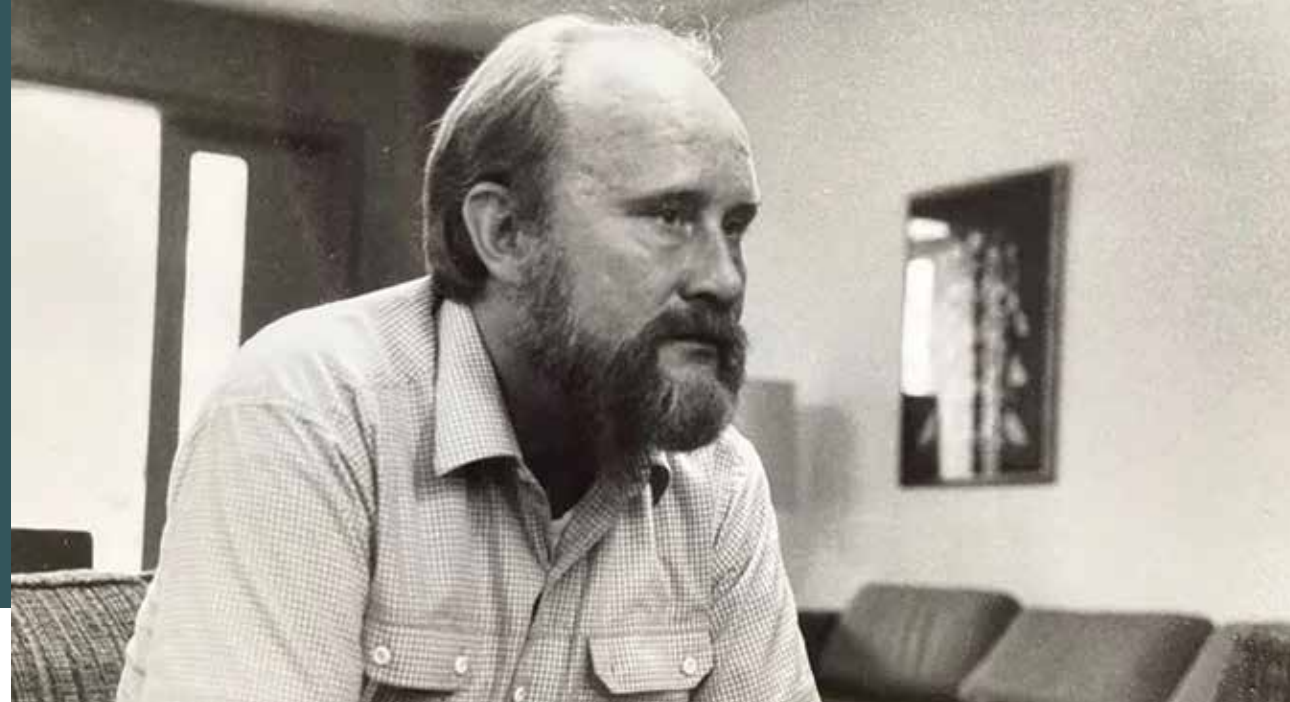
“I didn’t see myself always represented in the church,” Beckmann said.

them in growing in their leadership and gave them an open platform to raise concerns and ask questions. She also made significant contributions to the revision of evaluation criteria for the James Kenneth Echols Prize for Excellence in Preaching.

“Through her journey at LSTC, Beckmann has excelled in being consistent at promoting the values of DEI work, in the classroom, the public square, and through the Echols Preaching Prize,” shared Vima Courvertier-Cruz, the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice Director at LSTC. “What an honor and a joy it was to partner with Beckmann, and a team of three professors for the preaching competition to propose themes and texts focused on the proclamation of the Gospel from the perspectives of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, making this opportunity broader and more accessible to our students of color.”

Now that Beckmann’s time at LSTC has come to an end, she can look back fondly on her time, the many changes that have taken place, and the ways the community continues to evolve – a new building, new and diverse faculty members, a more global student body – all ready to learn, grow, and embrace new possibilities for what’s next.

“I feel grateful that in a critical time where we needed to take what was good from the past and incorporate it into something wholly new, I was able to make that journey with everyone,” Beckmann said. “That’s the story of celebration for me, that we got to this place together and God’s future opens up for us in ways we have yet to live into.” ✨



# A LEGACY OF INQUIRY

Dr. Phil Hefner leaves a lasting mark on religion and science

By Rhiannon Koehler

“I call my view of nature and naturalism a ‘God-intoxicated’ concept,” Theologian Philip Hefner wrote for *Covalence* in 2011.

Hefner, who passed away at his Chicago home on April 27, 2024, will be remembered for his belief in, “an expansive view of nature.” That framework challenged theologians, ethicists, scientists, and other ELCA community members to reexamine their role as stewards of nature, and to consider that science and faith could coexist and be mutually enriching.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Hefner emphasized that science, far from diminishing the human spirit, expands our understanding of it, revealing the depth and complexity of our existence within the divine creation.

The lasting impact of his work continues to shape the thinking and practice of theologians, scientists,

and members of the broader community who continue to embrace Hefner’s teachings on the ways religion and science can co-inform each other.

Born in 1932, Hefner’s early life was shaped by his experiences within the nurturing community of Messiah Lutheran Church in Nebraska, followed by his academic journey through Midland Lutheran College.

Eventually becoming a Fulbright scholar in Tübingen, Germany, then a graduate of the University of Chicago, Hefner was ordained in the United Lutheran Church in America in 1962. He joined the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1967, where he dedicated his life to teaching and publishing numerous articles and books that fostered the dialogue between theologians and scientists.

At the heart of Hefner’s theology was the concept that human beings are “co-creators” with God. This notion, which first emerged in his writings in the 1990s, encapsulated his

belief that while humans are intrinsically connected to the rest of creation, their advanced capabilities provide them with a greater responsibility to the world around them.

This idea was at the heart of Hefner’s work as he founded the Zygon Center for Religion and Science in 1988 and served as the editor of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* for two decades. Through these roles, he became a pivotal figure in the field, contributing significantly to the discourse on humanity’s responsibilities in an increasingly technological society.

The dialogue between religion and science that Hefner championed remains as relevant today as it was when he started his career. In recent years, the public discourse on these topics has become more urgent, particularly in the context of climate change and environmental stewardship.

The University of Chicago, a neighboring institution to

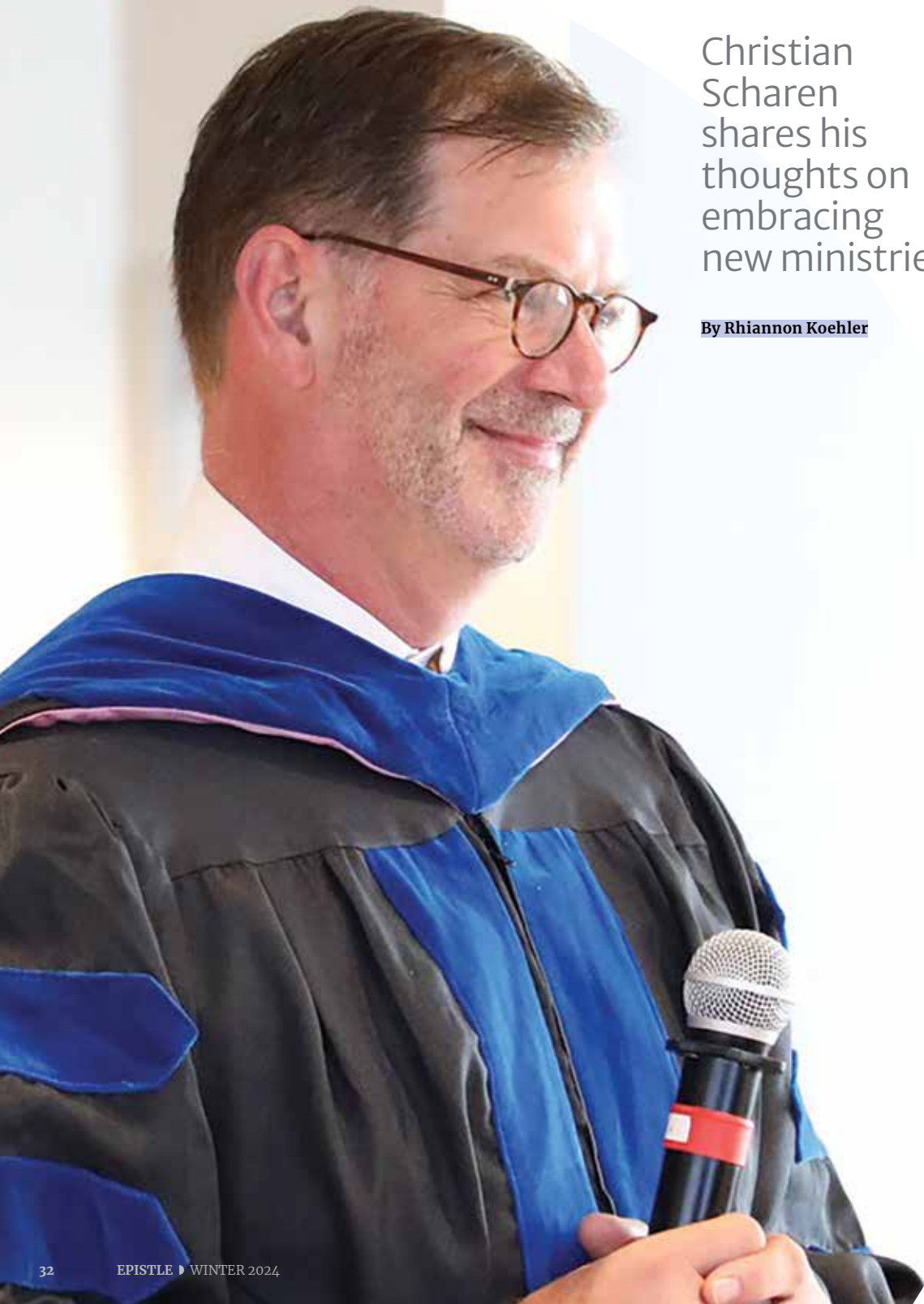
LSTC and a collaborator in many of Hefner’s initiatives, continues to be at the forefront of research on climate change. This ongoing work exemplifies the kind of interdisciplinary approach that Hefner advocated, as experts come together from various fields to address the most pressing issues of our time.

Hefner’s legacy is a testament to the importance of integrating faith with scientific inquiry. His work reminds us that our understanding of the world is enriched when we consider both the spiritual and the empirical dimensions of human experience.

As we confront the challenges of our contemporary world, from environmental crises to technological advancements, we can remember Hefner’s vision, marked by the hope that we, “recognize the revelation of science, [which shows] us what God has done, what God wants to do now and what God intends to do.” ✨



# LSTC IS THE PLACE. NOW IS THE TIME.



Christian Scharen shares his thoughts on embracing new ministries

By Rhiannon Koehler

Rev. Dr. Christian Scharen knows we're at an inflection point. "The traditional way that theological education has been done is just not working," he states calmly. "Schools are closing, their enrollments are shrinking. All the traditional markers show that that's the case."

The vista seems bleak. I wait for signs of melancholy: drooped shoulders, a sigh. Instead, his eyes brighten. "So," he says with an air of joyful anticipation, "how do you reinvent it in a way that responds to where the spirit is at work, bringing new things into being?"

Scharen has dedicated his illustrious tri-vocational career in teaching, pastoral care, and research to serving the changing spiritual needs of our world and answering just that question. He believes pivotal moments are invitations to strengthen community, develop new understandings of our church and world, and engage deeply in questions that invite nuanced discussion.

Many times, the invitation begins in the classroom. For Scharen, who has been teaching worship at LSTC even before he was appointed Associate Professor and Braatz Chair of Worship in 2024, building a truly discursive model in the classroom comes from a deeply held belief that students and instructors are co-creators in intellectually

generative spaces. "I try to create a space where the teacher is more like a curator of a space of encounter and inquiry," Scharen says. "And that space includes what we each bring because we have elements to offer each other for learning, especially when there's as diverse of a student body as we have at LSTC."

Honoring diversity of lived experience has been at the forefront of how Scharen approaches both his work in the world of worship and his work as a researcher. In worship, he has long looked for opportunities to bring people together outside of traditional spaces. In Brooklyn, Scharen notably served at St. Lydia's Dinner Church, a progressive LGBTQ-affirming congregation dedicated to bringing community together in spiritual practice over a home-cooked meal. Scharen describes it as a "chance to really live in a church that was designed and started to be a response to what's happening in the world, to be a new kind of Christian community." Now, the congregation is celebrating 15 years of service to seekers of all stripes: people looking for community, healing, God, or even just a meal.

"Serving at St. Lydia's taught me a lot about how the Christian community is changing," Scharen says. His experience with diverse contexts at St. Lydia's has deepened his commitment

to thinking about worship and pastoral leadership in a way that serves not just traditional communities of congregants but also people who for one reason or another have given up on church, especially queer and BIPOC folks who experience exclusion in church just as in society. It also encouraged him to embrace experimental spaces and expansive mindset in worship that centers practices of welcome.

In the context of acting as the new Braatz Chair of Worship at LSTC, Scharen looks forward to honoring both individual relationships and community-wide relationships.

"On an individual level, there's a lot of care that has to go into the spaces I'm responsible for giving shape to," Scharen says. "Think about students some of whom are crossing culture and language barriers, some dealing with economic difficulties...whatever their situation, I want to ask how I can acknowledge them, see the gifts and capacities they have, and honor the struggles they're dealing with?"

As an instructor, Scharen is committed to providing students with tools from texts like Homiletics expert Lis Valle-Ruiz and Preaching and Worship expert Andrew Wymer's *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics* as well as encouraging a deep

historical understanding of the role of the Church in the creation of empire, the development of race-based political ideologies, and the othering of state-designated undesirables. On a personal level, Scharen brings a deep commitment to inviting discussion, meeting students where they are, and creating opportunities for each student to bring their unique set of interests, skills, and experiences to class.

On a larger scale, Scharen is committed to producing research that will serve the Church and will offer new tools for other subject-matter experts teaching in classrooms. Recently, Scharen was awarded a grant from the Lilly Endowment alongside partners in the ELCA, the Metro New York Synod, the Oregon Synod, LSTC, and several new missional congregations. The research project involves talking to innovative congregations already directly responding to changes happening in church—congregations like St. Lydia's, for example—and discovering what they're learning about serving their communities and bringing them together.

"At the very end of the project we'll have a big conference where these congregations are the teachers of their own practice for other leaders who want to come in and listen and learn," Scharen says.

While working in the community is proving to be

crucial to the development of research and teaching paradigms, Scharen is also committed to advancing the historiography of Christianity. He is currently working on two books: one on Christianity before and after empire as well as another about the Church and the question of European-descended Americans inheriting a settler legacy. At the core of this research lies the question: "what do we do about the Church's problematic and horrifically violent past?"

As always, Scharen is committed to advancing practical and research inquiries that invite debate, discussion, and connection. "All my projects are related in a way," he says, "because they're all about how we can build a more trustworthy, believable, life-giving future for the Church."

Ultimately, for Scharen, that's the goal: to build a future at LSTC and in our global community that honors and acknowledges our complicated past, that sets the stage for a more inclusive future, and which creates new opportunities to engage structured practices of opening space for all members of our community. "LSTC is a vital place to be in this moment," Scharen affirms. "We're all here to see how theological education can be reimagined to better serve the way spiritual needs are evolving. And it's really exciting to me." ✨



# LSTC BOARD OF DIRECTORS WELCOMES NEW LEADERSHIP

By Keisha Dyson

As LSTC enters a new chapter, the Board of Directors has experienced a shift in its composition, marked by both continuity and change. The new board reflects a broader range of diversity and expertise, signaling the seminary's ongoing commitment to inclusive leadership and strengthening its position in theological education. On October 1, 2024, nine new members joined the board, while eight veteran members remain to offer guidance and mentorship, ensuring a smooth transition into this next phase of leadership.

**Greg Lewis**, who previously served as vice chairperson, assumed the role of chair, succeeding Terry Goff. After serving for 2 years on the board, **Pastor Mark Bartusch** of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin, stepped into the role as vice chairperson. These

appointments represent both a passing of the torch and a steadying hand as seasoned leaders step into new roles.

## A NEW CHAPTER WITH STEADY LEADERSHIP

Greg Lewis, LSTC's new chairperson, brings extensive legal and academic expertise to the role. His career as an attorney for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, coupled with his experience as an adjunct professor at DePaul College of Law, provides a strong foundation for his leadership of the board. As a longtime advocate for equity and justice, Lewis embodies LSTC's commitment to advancing theological education in ways that dismantle systemic racism and promote inclusivity. His previous service as vice chair and member of the board's Reparations Taskforce has already established him as a steady leader within the board's ranks, ensuring continuity as the seminary

enters this period of transition.

Pastor Mark Bartusch, who will serve as vice chairperson, brings both a deep pastoral perspective and significant academic insight to the board. As a dedicated leader in the La Crosse Area Synod, Bartusch has served the church with a steadfast commitment to ministry. In addition to his pastoral work, he is a former associate professor of theology at Valparaiso University, where he contributed his expertise to theological education. Bartusch's blend of academic and pastoral experience will be invaluable to the board's strategic planning and governance efforts.

The reorganization of the Board of Directors extends beyond its top positions. Each committee represents a mix of veteran and newly appointed members.

The Academic and Finance Committee is now chaired by **Rev. Greg Kaufmann**,

former assistant to the bishop in the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. His committee includes Bartusch, Central States Synod Bishop **Susan Candea**, LSTC alumnae and Houston-area campus ministry director **Morgan Gates**. Together, they will guide the seminary's academic programming and financial planning, ensuring alignment with its long-term goals.

On the Finance and Operations Committee, **Larry Tietjen**, retired, President, Experitec, Inc. will take the helm, joined by Greg Lewis, internal auditor **Mercy Ndoshi-Shoo**, retired finance director **Patricia Woods**, and retired property manager **Ginni Young**. The team is charged with ensuring financial stability while planning for future growth.

Meanwhile, the Marketing and Fundraising Committee will continue to be led by **Maryjeanne Schaffmeyer**, whose career in medical center management has

honed her skills in both fundraising and operational leadership. Alongside her are **DeWayne Cook**, a chief development officer at Western Michigan University; **Paul Erbes**, Habitat for Humanity's vice president of marketing; Northern Illinois Bishop **Stacie Fidler**; and LSTC alum **Rev. Preston Fields** who is a pastor in Chicago. Their work will focus on bolstering the seminary's visibility and cultivating new donor relationships.

Finally, the Governance Committee, tasked with overseeing the board's structure and operational integrity, will be spearheaded by **Kelly Chatman**, executive director of the Center for Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement, and **Joseph Falese**, retired senior vice president of student affairs Lewis University. They bring extensive nonprofit governance expertise to the role, ensuring that the seminary adheres to best practices.

## HONORING OUTGOING MEMBERS

As new members are welcomed, the contributions of outgoing members are celebrated. **Terry Goff**, **Bishop Yehiel Curry**, **Kristi Ferguson**, **Pastor Bridget Jones**, **Karen McClain**, **Harry Mueller**, and **Janette Schumm** have served LSTC with dedication and passion. Their collective wisdom and leadership have helped guide LSTC through critical milestones, including the reaffirmation of its accreditation and the continued development of its programs.

As LSTC looks to the future, the leadership of its Board of Directors will be critical in ensuring that the seminary remains a beacon for theological education. ✨

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Effective October 1, 2024



**Greg Lewis (2028), Chairperson**  
ELCA at large  
Retired, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Office of the Regional Counsel, Attorney; DePaul College of Law, Adjunct Professor



**Mark Bartusch (2026), Vice Chairperson**  
La Crosse Area Synod  
Pastor, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church



**Bishop Susan Candea (2026)**  
ELCA Region 4  
Bishop, Central States Synod



**Kelly Chatman (2026)**  
ELCA at large  
Executive Director, Center for Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement



**DeWayne Cook (2028), Secretary**  
ELCA at large  
Chief Development Officer, Western Michigan University



**Paul K. Erbes (2028)**  
Western Iowa Synod  
Vice President for Advancement and Marketing, Habitat for Humanity



**Joseph Falese (2026)**  
Metropolitan Chicago Synod  
Senior Vice President, Student Affairs, Lewis University (Retired)



**Bishop Stacie Fidler (2028)**  
ELCA Region 5  
Bishop, Northern Illinois Synod



**Rev. Preston Fields (2028)**  
Northern Illinois Synod  
Senior Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church



**Terry Goff (2024), Chairperson**  
Central/Southern Illinois Synod  
Director, Emissions Regulations and Conformance, Caterpillar, Inc. (Retired)



**Bishop Yehiel Curry (2024)**  
ELCA Region 5  
Bishop, Metropolitan Chicago Synod



**Kristi Ferguson (2024)**  
Southeastern Iowa Synod  
Professor of General Internal Medicine, University of Iowa (Retired)



**Bridget Jones (2024)**  
ELCA at large  
Pastor of Faith Formation, Messiah Lutheran Church



**Morgan Gates (2026)**  
Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod  
Director for Houston Area Campus Ministry - ELCA



**Rev. Greg Kaufmann (2026)**  
Northwest Synod of Wisconsin  
Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, Assistant to the Bishop (Retired)



**Mercy Ndoshi-Shoo (2028)**  
Nebraska Synod  
Internal Auditor, Valmont Industries Inc.



**Maryjeanne Schaffmeyer (2026)**  
East Central Synod of Wisconsin  
Chief Operating Officer, Appleton and Theda Clark Medical Centers (Retired)



**Larry Tietjen (2028)**  
ELCA at large  
Experitec, Inc., President & CEO (Retired)



**Patricia Cornelius Woods (2028)**  
ELCA at large  
Director of Finance and Administration, Northwestern Memorial Foundation (Retired)



**Ginni Young (2026), Treasurer**  
Arkansas-Oklahoma Synod  
Commercial property owner and manager (Retired)

## EXITING BOARD MEMBERS



**Karen McClain (2024)**  
ELCA at large  
Senior Director, Athletic Partnership and Strategic Initiatives, UCLA



**Harry Mueller (2024)**  
ELCA at large  
President, Delta Group Electronics, Inc.



**Janette C. Schumm (2024)**  
Central States Synod  
Owner of certified public accounting firm (Retired)



**M**y first semester of seminary, I took History and Theology I with Dr. Peter Vethanayagamy and I wrote an essay on the cultural context of the Roman Empire and its effects on the spread of Christianity. During that class, I learned about the Via Egnatia, a Roman military road that the Apostle Paul used to travel between Philippi and Thessalonika.

I never dreamed that my journey at LSTC would be concluded by an opportunity to physically walk that road during LSTC's "World of the Bible" pilgrimage to biblical sites of Greece and Turkey in May 2024, led by LSTC's Dr. Barbara Rossing and Dr. Esther Menn.

And yet, only a few months ago, I found myself at Philippi where the Apostle Paul established the first Christian church on European soil around 49-50 AD, walking on a part of the Via Egnatia. It was a shining moment in a transformational pilgrimage where I, and other LSTC students like me, were able to fully appreciate the historical contexts of the Bible and Christianity. Together, we found spiritual renewal, a blessed baptism, in being able to experience keystone sites so foundational to our faith.

As an example, only a few hours after walking the Via Egnatia, we visited the Baptistery of St. Lydia. It is said to be the spot where the Apostle Paul baptized Lydia, the first Christian in Europe, in the river Zygakti (Acts 16: 13-15). I immediately took my shoes off to soak my tired feet in the cool water of the river.

As I sat at the river's edge, I felt emotion overtake me. This sacred spot is a pilgrimage for many Christians, and I can now say that I am one of them. I was so thankful to God



# A BLESSED BAPTISM

MDiv student Kylee Bestenlehner on the pilgrimage of a lifetime

Kylee Bestenlehner, Emily Moentmann, and Adam Groenke swim with a friend in the Aegean Sea.



for this opportunity and the reminder of my baptism and new life I received through Christ our Lord.

Water—and its scarcity and importance in the region and our faith—became a common theme throughout our pilgrimage. We remembered our baptisms and walked through the ancient baptistry in the basilica of St. John. We swam in the Aegean Sea and sailed in the same waters as John the author of Revelation.

In Istanbul, we walked through the underground Basilica Cistern, which used to hold 2.8 million cubic feet of water and reflected on water as a political tool for both the Roman and Ottoman Empires, for where there is water, there is life.

In Ephesus, we saw the Roman water pipes system and learned that the wealthiest parts of their society had access to both hot and cold water. In Pamukkale, site of the Travertines, also known as Cleopatra’s pools, we soaked in mineral hot spring water where ancient peoples came for healing.

I believe humanity is not just thirsty but dehydrated for the truth of the Gospel. What does it mean to serve a God who declares himself the living water? Who amid an Empire that used water as a means of control, says, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me!” (John 7:37b).

Those words took on new meaning as I experienced the healing waters of the Aegean and echoed throughout my journey through Biblical sites that gave new life to my evolving ministry. I will be carrying these thoughts and experiences with me as I graduate with my MDiv and embark on another journey—this one an uncharted pilgrimage into the world of my own ministry. 🌿



LSTC students experience the Basilica Cistern in Istanbul.



Clockwise from top: The group takes a photo in front of the Parthenon in the the Acropolis of Athena in Athens; The Ephesus Baptistry of the Church of St. John the Theologian, just outside Ephesus, where the group was able to walk through and contemplate their baptisms; Kylee Bestenlehner and Liza Johnson reading the Corinthians in Corinth.







## LSTC ACHIEVES SUCCESSFUL REAFFIRMATION OF ATS AND HLC ACCREDITATION

By Keisha Dyson

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) is proud to announce the successful reaffirmation of its accreditation by both the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). These achievements underscore LSTC's commitment to maintaining the highest standards of theological education and ensures that LSTC remains steadfast in its mission to provide exceptional theological education and to serve its community with integrity and excellence.

### ATS ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMATION

LSTC underwent a comprehensive review

by an ATS visit team from February 19-22. The team's detailed assessments and evaluations culminated in a final report on March 11. This report, characterized by its positive and encouraging findings, was ratified without alterations by the ATS Commission on Accrediting on June 4. This reaffirmation extends LSTC's ATS accreditation for the next ten years, until 2034. The review process highlighted several affirmations and recommendations aimed at continuous improvement. LSTC will submit three interim reports in 2025, 2026, and 2028 to ensure ongoing compliance with ATS standards and to document continuous enhancements to its educational offerings.

### HLC ACCREDITATION REAFFIRMATION

Parallel to the ATS review, LSTC hosted a visit team from the HLC on April 29-30 for a mid-cycle comprehensive review. This critical evaluation is essential for maintaining our accreditation status and ensuring the continued high quality of our academic programs. The visit team's report was submitted to LSTC on May 17 and subsequently reviewed for factual accuracy before being forwarded to the HLC Institutional Actions Council (IAC).

On July 16, the IAC formally approved the visit team's report and recommendations without any changes. This approval extends LSTC's HLC accreditation through the 2029-2030 academic year. The institution is required to submit only one interim

report in 2027, reflecting the confidence HLC has in LSTC's ongoing operations and educational quality.

In a statement to the campus community, President James Nieman celebrated this news and thanked the steering committee who worked diligently throughout both accreditation processes.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is a membership organization of graduate schools in the United States and Canada that offer graduate-level theological education. ATS is responsible for accrediting these schools and ensuring that they meet specific standards of quality and excellence in their educational programs.

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is an independent accrediting agency that accredits degree-granting post-secondary educational institutions in the United States. HLC is one of the six regional institutional accreditors in the U.S., and it primarily serves institutions in the central United States. 🌱

## LSTC STUDENTS MEET WITH REV. JESSE JACKSON AT RAINBOW PUSH COALITION HEADQUARTERS

By Lyndsay Monsen

A group of LSTC students had the incredible opportunity earlier this fall to meet with esteemed civil rights leader and theologian Rev. Jesse Jackson. The students, as part of Dean Linda Thomas and Dr. Francisco Herrera's Public Church II class, traveled to the national headquarters of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition in the Kenwood neighborhood of Chicago, expecting to just meet for class and tour the building. Soon after their arrival, Rev. Jackson entered the room.

During his time with LSTC students, Rev. Jackson answered questions about his ministry and shared his hopes for them as the next generation of faith leaders. He paused several times to look each student in the eye and ask them what was on their mind. Third-year Master of Divinity student Megan Mong said, "It was awe inspiring to even be near him, but to shake his hand and speak with him was something I never thought I would get the chance to do."

Public Church II is a capstone course for master's students at LSTC, intended to help students reflect on their contextual education experiences thus far in their programs and prepare and equip them to be public-facing leaders in their ministry. Meeting accomplished and influential leaders like Rev. Jackson is



Dean Linda Thomas and Dr. Francisco Herrera's Public Church II class meets with Rev. Jesse Jackson at Rainbow PUSH Coalition headquarters on September 24, 2024.

one way students in this class are exposed to the transformative potential of embarking on careers in faith, ministry, and public service.

Rev. Dr. Linda Thomas, LSTC's Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs could sense the impact this meeting had on her class. She said, "[Rev. Jackson]'s legacy as a living legend taught us that our faith must extend beyond church walls into the heart of social justice. This experience reminded us that we are called not only to study theology but to actively engage in advocacy and service, inspiring us to become true agents of change in our communities."

LSTC also provided a Zoom option for students who were unable to attend in-person, which allowed students across the country

to join the meeting and have a chance to share some words with Rev. Jackson. Final-year Master of Divinity student Trenton Ormsbee-Hale, located in Texas, reflected on what the experience was like for him in a hybrid format. "Virtually visiting Rainbow PUSH Coalition and meeting the Rev. Jesse Jackson was such a powerful moment... in many ways, being a part of a class that takes trips to organizations like Rainbow PUSH and has one-on-one conversations with a civil rights hero like Rev. Jackson is a kind of life-line of hope for public church leaders like myself: leaders who are serving in places like Texas where it seems the religious and political are overwhelmingly against the Gospel Kingdom of justice and peace."

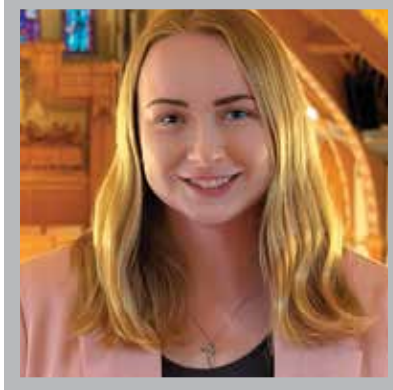
This profound meeting



LSTC student Bobby Lewis helps elevate Rev. Jesse Jackson's voice while meeting with students.

and moment came about after LSTC student Pastor Bobby Lewis met with Dean Thomas to see if LSTC's Public Church classes and his work at Rainbow PUSH Coalition could collaborate on occasion. This class was the first attempt to do so, and it is no doubt the words of Rev. Jackson will be ringing in these students' ears for years to come. 🌱





**HAILEY BIANCO**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Arts in Ministry  
**HOMETOWN:** Hobart, IN

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I was drawn to LSTC for its commitment to social justice and inclusion for all God’s people. I also chose LSTC because I will have the ability to pursue seminary while also continuing my current role in youth ministry at Edgebrook Lutheran.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 I am very grateful for the mentorship of Pastor Christina Garrett Klein, the support from my community at Edgebrook, and my youth pastor who have all played a significant role in helping me hear my call into rostered ministry. I am also thankful for the people and experiences I’ve had at Covenant Point Bible Camp and North Park University which led me into ministry in the first place. Lastly, I wouldn’t be able to be in this place without the support of the ELCA and Fund for Leaders program.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 While at LSTC I hope to continue my discernment and get clarity on where God is calling me next. Along the way I hope to strengthen my ministerial leadership skills and deepen my biblical knowledge.



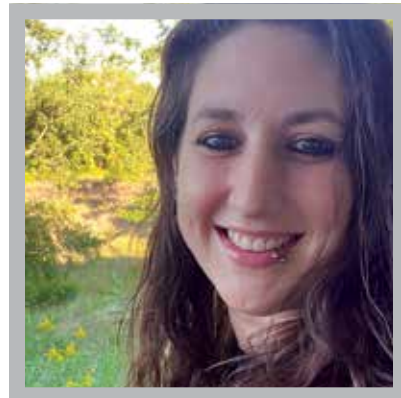
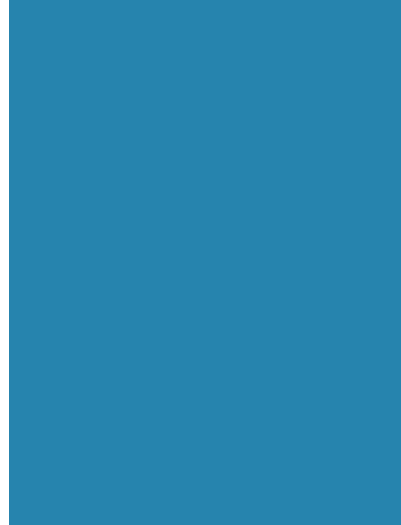
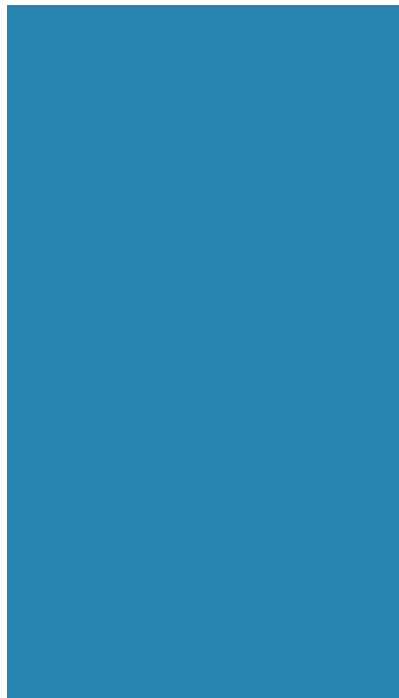
**KEVIN BOYD**

**PRONOUNS:** he/him  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity  
**HOMETOWN:** Tampa, FL

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose LSTC for the location and the professors.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My bishop and pastor both helped me on my path.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I’m hoping that my time at LSTC will prepare me to be an effective minister for Christ.



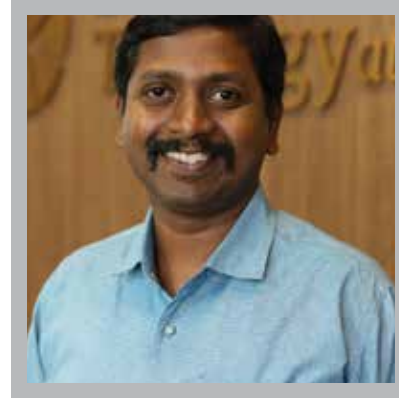
**KRISTEN COMBS**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her/hers  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity  
**HOMETOWN:** Countryside, IL

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose LSTC because I am a recent member of the ELCA church, and I knew it would be a safe space to learn and grow.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 The support of my church, Grace Lutheran Church in La Grange, Illinois, Pastor Heidi Torgerson and other alumni and church staff, as well as my wife, Victoria.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I hope to prepare for my calling as a hospital chaplain in a learning environment that is safe, accepting, and open.



**REV. RAJESH KUMAR JAYARAJ**

**PRONOUNS:** he/him/his  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Arts  
**HOMETOWN:** Bangalore, India

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I had heard about LSTC from friends. After 10 years of ordained ministry in India, I was planning to go for higher studies in Germany. My wife, then-fiancée Dr. Chrisida Anandan, an alum, shared some information about LSTC and encouraged me to apply. I was impressed by LSTC’s public church focus, the diverse international community, and its theological values. After prayers and careful discernment, I accepted God’s call to move to Chicago.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My parents, my wife, and my family helped me to get here. I thank members of my congregation whom I pastored for their continued prayers. I am grateful to LSTC, particularly to the registrar, the admissions office, and the office of the Dean of Students for their continued guidance and support.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I hope and trust that my time at LSTC will enhance my theological education so that I may efficiently minister to the growing needs of the Church. The significance of ecumenical concerns and interfaith dialogue is essential in today’s world. This is where enhancing my knowledge with regards to God, the people of God, and the creation of God becomes crucial as we serve in pluralistic contexts and address global concerns.



**ELIZABETH JOHNCY**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her/hers  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity  
**HOMETOWN:** Mumbai, India

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose to join LSTC because I felt it was God’s perfect plan. Another reason is the LSTC community. I have experienced our community’s hospitality and compassion for the past six years. In 2018, I attended my first summer program at LSTC (LRWC), not intending to join the school; but just to know the community and the place. But this turned out to be a good beginning for me. My interest in going forward with theological studies started growing here at LRWC.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My interest in going forward with theological studies started growing after my experience at LRWC. Apart from this, some of the professors and ex-students of LSTC played a key role in helping me get here.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 The main intention behind my joining the seminary is to study the Word of God in detail.



**INGRID KIEFFER**

**PRONOUNS:** they/them/theirs  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose LSTC because I wanted to attend a seminary that had in-person classes, a community that would be active and inviting, and a place where, as a queer person, I would feel welcomed and feel like I could authentically be who I am without fear.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My home congregation in California has been very supportive of me being here. Also, my parents, they know that I will be able to make an impact. Now being in Chicago, I would say that my parish and the community within have been supportive.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I really want to lean into the Public Church aspect of LSTC and learn more about community organizing. I also want to learn from different institutions via the ACTS Consortium. As someone who isn’t a Lutheran, I want to be able to make the best out of my time in seminary by being able to prepare myself for time as a priest. Finally, I am looking forward to learning about different ways to approach scripture, especially through a queer lens as someone who identifies as non-binary and that being one of my core identities.







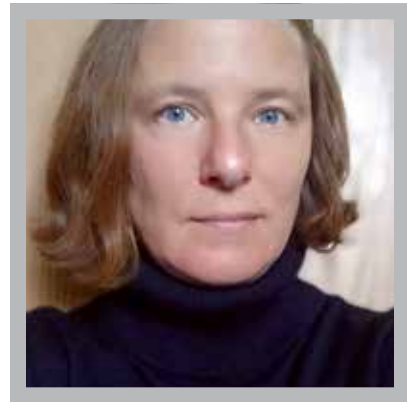
**NATALIA PIERSON**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Lutheran Year  
**HOMETOWN:** Seattle, WA

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose LSTC because of their dedication to the public church.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My friends from church and from work. They continue to affirm me in my ordination journey.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I did not grow up in the Lutheran church, so I hope to learn more about what it means to be a member of the ELCA.



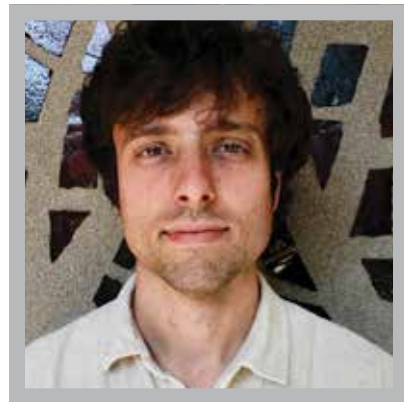
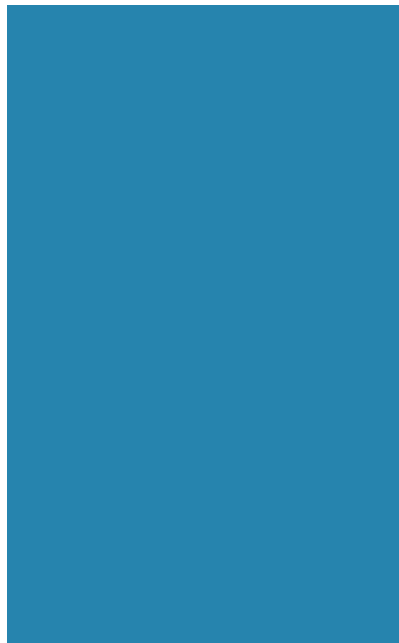
**DENISE MORRIS**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her/hers  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity  
**HOMETOWN:** Milwaukee, WI

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I am a devout Lutheran and honored to have been accepted by LSTC!

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My family, friends, and professional associations made all of this possible.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I am super excited to hopefully delve into Luther's writings as well as learn history and study the Bible



**JACK SHASSBERGER**

**PRONOUNS:** he/him/his  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Divinity  
**HOMETOWN:** Santa Monica, CA

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I chose LSTC because I was baptized at an ELCA church and after a long period of discernment I felt that it was the right fit for me in pursuing my vocation to be a Pastor of Word and Sacrament in the Lutheran church.

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 My church community including my Pastor, friends and family, and the Bishop of the Southwest California Synod helped me to get into this program and have consistently provided support for my calling.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I hope to gain a deeper understanding of church history, the sacraments, and grow in the grace and knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. I am very excited about where my life journey has led me so far and I'm happy to share this with the students and faculty at LSTC and at my home congregation Grace Lutheran Church in Culver City, CA., and also the world.



**JI BU**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Theology  
**HOMETOWN:** Muse, Mungbaw Northern Shan State of Myanmar

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS?**  
 As a student, you should focus on your studies to be successful. Your community relationships are important because they will help you if you only ask them to.

**WHAT PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES OR FACULTY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN YOUR BIGGEST SUPPORT THUS FAR?**  
 At LSTC, we have a beautiful community from many different cultures and places. The international students have been some of my biggest supporters. They have become my family since I am so far from home. My roommates and learning partner have made me feel loved by staying connected with me. Pastor Erik Christensen has also been very supportive to the Myanmar students by creating worship spaces for us to pray for our families and communities during the war crisis. Gatherings and spaces like this have relieved some of our anxieties and gave us peace during this time. All the faculty mentors I have had are all very concerned about our communities back home and keep them in their prayers.

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO DURING THIS ACADEMIC YEAR?**  
 After completing my program, I would like to go back to my people in Myanmar and share my knowledge with them.



**CHAR LAYWA**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her/hers  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Theology  
**HOMETOWN:** Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar

**WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LSTC?**  
 I would like to say, "Just chill out and learn freely in a new setting what you want and adjust it."

**WHAT PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HELPED YOU TO GET HERE?**  
 I want to start by giving thanks to God for giving me strength. I would also like to thank all of the good people who surround me: my family, my community back home in Myanmar and here in Chicago, all my professors from Myanmar, and my professors at LSTC that support me in every way with words of encouragement, prayers, and support.

**WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO LEARN DURING YOUR TIME AT LSTC?**  
 I am hoping to learn more about historical criticism and biblical interpretation.



**SWEETRY NOVERLINDRA (SITOHANG)**

**PRONOUNS:** she/her/hers  
**DEGREE PROGRAM:** Master of Theology  
**HOMETOWN:** Bengkulu, Indonesia

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS?**  
 This year is my first year in my ThM program. However, I finished my MA degree at LSTC last May. So, for myself and other first year students, I want to say enjoy every class and join every event on campus. It helps us a lot to build community and create a larger network.

**WHAT PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES OR FACULTY MEMBERS HAVE BEEN YOUR BIGGEST SUPPORT THUS FAR?**  
 Every person and community in this school is very supportive.

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST LOOKING FORWARD TO DURING THIS ACADEMIC YEAR?**  
 I am looking forward to every course which I take and every event that I can participate in on campus.







# Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

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[www.lstc.edu](http://www.lstc.edu)

*Address Service Requested*

## Reimagine Our Future at LSTC

Embark on a new journey with LSTC, the seminary in motion, as we redefine the future of theological education. Our campaign, rooted in reimagining, reinventing, reaffirming, and renewing, propels us forward in response to the evolving landscape of the times.

We are reinventing education through cutting-edge opportunities for distance learning and integrated technology. Your generosity fuels this project, ensuring that our students engage with a curriculum that prepares them for the challenges of the modern world.

The campaign reaffirms our commitment to accessibility and excellence. Your support directly impacts students by:



**PROVIDING  
SCHOLARSHIPS**



**ENSURING  
ACADEMIC  
OPPORTUNITIES**



**EMPOWERING  
STUDENTS**

As we renew our investments in the centers and initiatives that define our seminary, your contribution becomes an integral part of sustaining what makes LSTC special. We invite you to join us on this journey because we can't just imagine the future—we need to build it, together. Your support ensures the success of LSTC for generations to come, leaving a lasting legacy of transformative leadership and theological excellence.

Learn more at [www.lstc.edu/reimagine](http://www.lstc.edu/reimagine)