

Navigating a season of transition
with Michael Cooper-White

How our theological principles
drive social justice

New pathways for innovation
in theological education

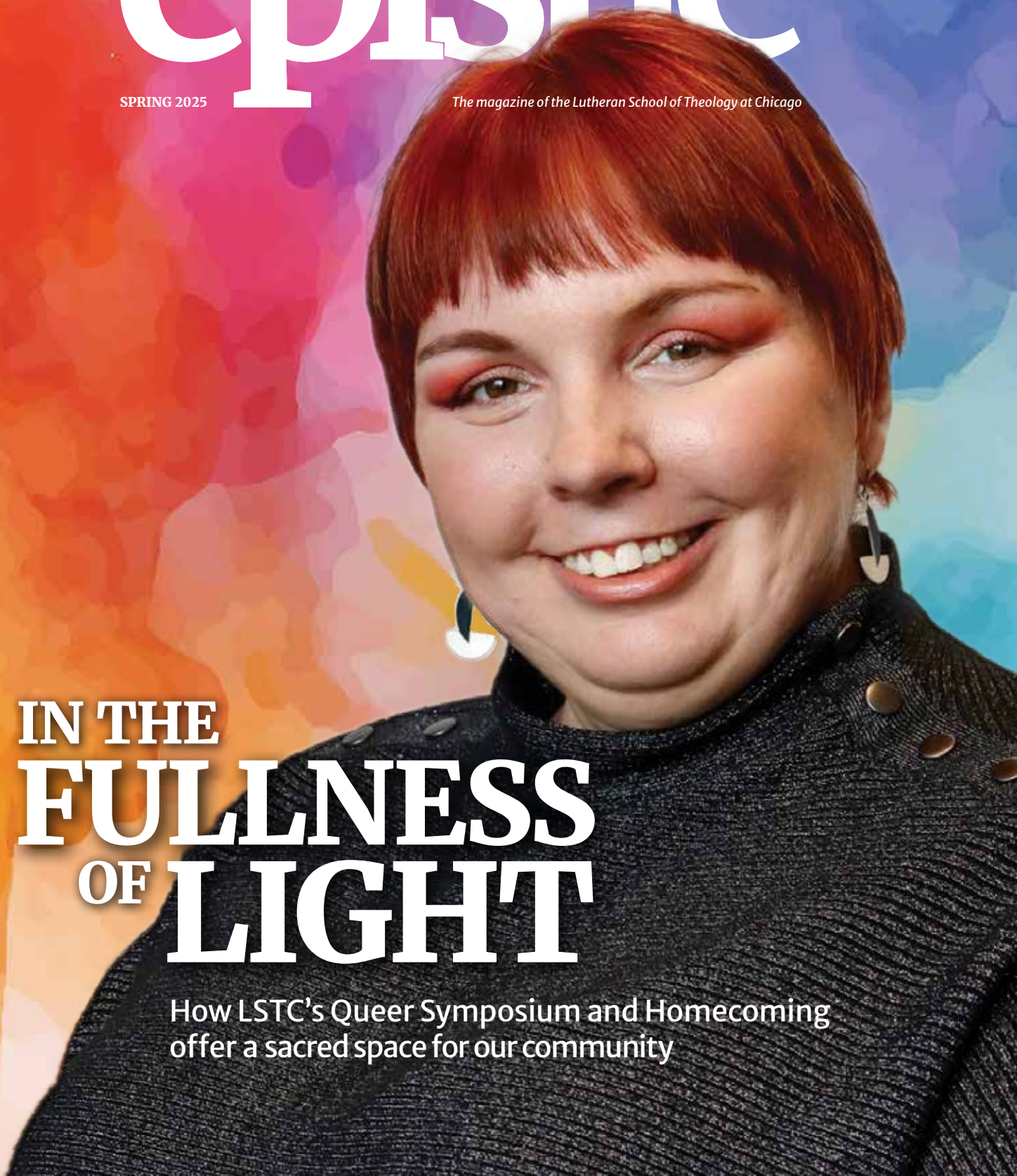
epistle

SPRING 2025

The magazine of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

IN THE FULLNESS OF LIGHT

How LSTC's Queer Symposium and Homecoming
offer a sacred space for our community





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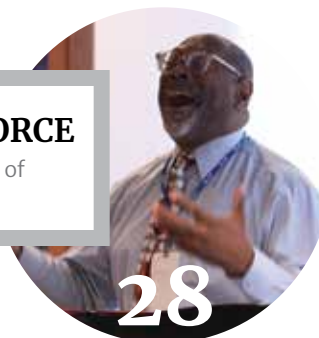
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The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, forms visionary leaders to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

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TRANSITIONING WITH GRACE AND PEACE

Beloved Community,

As we stand at the threshold of a new season, we find ourselves reflecting on the peculiar power of transitions. They invite us to hold both the weight of the past and the promise of what lies ahead. For the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, this season is one of change, growth, and faithful discernment.

Many of you know that this past February, President James Nieman retired after thirteen remarkable years of service. His leadership was more than administrative; it was deeply personal. With vision and grace, he guided LSTC through seasons of challenge and renewal, always with an unwavering commitment to forming leaders who serve the world with courage and hope. While his physical presence among us will be missed, his impact endures in the countless ways he shaped this community and its mission. We send him forth with prayers of gratitude and joy as he enters a new chapter of life.

In mid-February LSTC welcomed Interim President Rev. Michael Cooper-White, M.Div., D.D., a leader with decades of experience in theological education, the ELCA, and beyond. President Cooper-White brings a deep commitment to LSTC's mission of forming visionary leaders who serve the church and the world. In fall 2025, LSTC will welcome a new permanent President into the fold. But even as leadership transitions continue, the real story of LSTC continues in the lives of the people who carry its mission forward. From innovative academic programs that challenge and inspire, to interfaith dialogues that build

bridges in a divided world, the work of this community is vibrant and enduring. We think of our faculty and staff, whose dedication reflects the heart of our calling. We think of our students, who are courageously preparing to serve a world that desperately needs their gifts. And we think of you—our alumni, community members, and supporters—whose prayers, encouragement, and partnership sustain this community in ways both seen and unseen.

In the spirit of storytelling, we are reminded of the Apostle Paul. When he wrote to his communities, it was often in seasons of change, uncertainty, even absence. He knew the power of a letter—not just as a means of communication but as a tangible reminder of shared connection and purpose. “Grace to you and peace,” he wrote, pairing those words as an offering of divine mercy and steadfast hope. In Paul’s time, just as in ours, those words held a weight that carried communities through transitions and into new chapters.

So as we move forward, let us lean into that same grace and peace. Let us hold fast to the foundation upon which this seminary is built: faith in God, hope for the future, commitment to social justice, and love for one another. Thank you for being part of this story. Your prayers, your support, and your presence—whether near or far—are gifts that bind us together. We will continue to update you on the journey ahead, and we invite you to walk alongside us with confidence and grace.

Yours in hope, faith, and our shared future,
The LSTC Board of Directors



EVEN AS LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS UNFOLD, THE REAL STORY OF LSTC CONTINUES IN THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE WHO CARRY ITS MISSION FORWARD. FROM INNOVATIVE ACADEMIC PROGRAMS THAT CHALLENGE AND INSPIRE, TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUES THAT BUILD BRIDGES IN A DIVIDED WORLD, THE WORK OF THIS COMMUNITY IS VIBRANT AND ENDURING.

FOUR CALLINGS IN ONE PLACE

Dear LSTC friends:

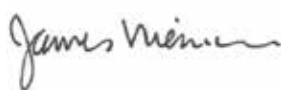
If ever I had a plan for my life, being a president was not part of it. In younger years, I wanted to become a medical illustrator. With my modest artistic skills, I wanted to study at the University of Washington with Phyllis Wood, a premier instructor in the craft. The prospect of depicting the body's mysteries, small or large, would be perfect for me, revealing what was otherwise hidden. The work was intensely isolated yet deeply communal, connecting with professionals who could bring relief or healing. I wanted simply to work alongside them, gently on the page, a quiet lesson about systems and structures: "This isn't so complicated. I'll show you."

Then there was the period I wanted to become a translator. With my simple linguistic abilities, I wanted to be like Gen Watanabe in Ann Patchett's novel, "Bel Canto," a character whose professional facility across many languages wove together diverse lives amidst the unraveling crises of the story. The chance to offer meaning and understanding, to assist in building the human bonds that we so often crave, this seemed like noble work. I never wanted to be at the center of anything. I wanted to accompany those who could really make a difference with a little better access to those they served. I wanted calmly to tell them: "This isn't beyond you. Just listen."

What happened instead of these plans was a calling – actually several. The deepest and most enduring was the call four decades ago to be a spouse, later a parent. I don't idealize this for anyone else. There are no norms for how one lives or with whom. Marriage with family is not everyone's gift – but it was for me, a gift that changed me completely. Far from being my own invention, it was a call that originated outside me, first from JoAnn, then Clara and Madelene. For me, that's how a call works. You don't choose it. It chooses you. And in the wake of such an overwhelming calling, there can follow only the recognition of blessing and deep thanks.

The other main calling across these years is the one that ends today but began long ago and unexpectedly. No one, including me, ever thought I would be a pastor. There were questions, doubts, faults, but also folks who helped me see what I could not and hear what I would not. To serve wildly diverse communities, rural and urban, was a blessing. To teach others preparing for brave service, another blessing. To join our little, complex community for the past thirteen years doing things we never before imagined, this too has been a blessing. And with that blessing, I name my thanks for all of you, a thanks that stands in inverse proportion to these few words.

Our school is a scrappy little invention, saturated with confounding paradox and complicated, fierce joy. Of late it has sheltered my call, a call that moved from early days of crisis, to bracing self-examination, then letting go of cherished dreams and illusions, and now enters fresh innovation drawn from deep values. For me, four callings in one place. And yet, it's also been one calling that echoes my past. I got to be an illustrator: "This isn't so complicated. I'll show you." And I got to be a translator: "This isn't beyond you. Just listen." In holy mercy, we have found our way through all this together, and you all have been a gift to me. Thank you. God bless you.





NAVIGATING A SEASON OF TRANSITION

A CONVERSATION WITH INTERIM PRESIDENT MICHAEL COOPER-WHITE

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is entering a pivotal moment in its history, and at the helm for this season of transition is Rev. Michael Cooper-White, M.Div., D.D. Appointed as Interim President in February 2025, President Cooper-White brings a wealth of leadership experience in theological education, church ministry, and institutional governance. With a career that spans nearly two decades as a

seminary president, as well as a deep commitment to forming visionary leaders, he is uniquely positioned to help guide LSTC through this time of change. As he embarks on his tenure, we sat down with him to discuss his vision, priorities, and hopes for the seminary's future.

Q What inspired you to take on this interim leadership role at LSTC?

I have known about and admired LSTC for fifty

years, since my own days a seminarian at Gettysburg. The school's reputation for academic excellence, dedication to blending Lutheran heritage with ecumenical and interreligious impulses, and social justice and urban commitments are all in sync with my own values. Beginning with Bill Leshner, I have worked with and learned from each of LSTC's presidents and other leaders, so the prospect of honoring and building upon their legacy for a brief interim

time is truly a privilege. On the more personal side, I lived previously in Chicagoland while serving with the ELCA Churchwide Organization, so I knew I could survive both a Chicago winter and summer! Plus, my oldest son, his wife, and our oldest granddaughter live in the area, affording me more time to enjoy visits with them. Bottom line, though, as I engaged in conversation with LSTC leaders considering interim candidates, it felt like a "call."

Q What excites you most about being here?

After my first few days here, I am truly excited by the LSTC community. While there are still many I have yet to meet, the warm welcome from board members, faculty and staff, and students has been outstanding. It is inspiring how the school's leaders are responding amidst the current political climate with unwavering commitment to LSTC's core values and commitments. With the world of higher education, and especially theological education, in a time of extraordinary transformation, it's exciting to watch LSTC on the cutting edge of innovation.

Q You've led seminaries through significant

transitions before. What insights from your past experiences will you bring to LSTC during this time?

I'm old enough to remember the day President John F. Kennedy stood up and said, "We're going to the moon and in this decade." Nobody had any clue how to do that. But the best minds of the time were drawn together to figure it out. So, when a school faces big challenges, as does almost every seminary currently, we can draw

upon the collective wisdom through the elusive process academic institutions refer to as "shared governance." Leaders listen to many voices but are not paralyzed in the face of inevitable resistance to change. As for the astronauts, well it just requires a measure of adventure and courage to go where none have gone before.

Q Beyond your academic and administrative background, you're also a writer and even a flight instructor. How do those experiences shape your approach to leadership?

Yes, friends and former colleagues roll their eyes at the plethora of my aviation analogies. My first book on leadership was *On a Wing and a Prayer*. It's important to keep the big picture, maintain "situational awareness" and avoid being distracted. If there's a thunderstorm or mountain up ahead, make a prompt midcourse correction! A major contributor to safety in the skies has been the emphasis on "crew resource management" or CRM, which basically teaches pilots to listen to all the voices: crew, passengers, [and] air traffic controllers. That's more important than ever as we navigate the turbulence in higher education these days.

As for writing, my surprise encore career has been in local journalism as a beat reporter and columnist for the daily Gettysburg Times. It's taught me to summarize complex issues for non-experts, write crisply, and deliver on deadline. Also, to be non-defensive when my editor "improves" a piece and occasionally publishes grammatical errors that weren't in my original!

Q LSTC is in the process of searching for its next permanent president.

How do you see your role in helping the seminary prepare for that transition?

An interim leader is like John or Jane the Baptist, preparing for the one who is to come. One of LSTC's many wise board leaders observed that a newcomer sees things with "fresh eyes" and can point out dynamics that long-timers may fail to see. LSTC's presidents have been strong, gifted leaders who served long terms in these days when a typical presidency is about five years or less. My own experience, and observations of others, convinces me that sustained leadership is critical. So, I hope any contributions I might make in my brief tenure will clear the runway for the next leader ("There he goes again . . .") to soar.

Q Theological education is facing many challenges, from financial sustainability to changing models of ministry. How do you think seminaries like LSTC can continue to thrive and adapt?

When asked that a good bit in recent years, I've begun my answer saying, "If you've seen one school, you've seen one school." There are no one-size-fits-all answers to sustainability. Many seminaries, including the majority related to the ELCA, have found partnerships the key to sustainability. It seems to me LSTC's new home in a rich ecumenical center holds promise of forging a new paradigm. And I wonder as the ELCA's churchwide and synodical expressions struggle with shrinking staffs if more of the resourcing of congregations and other ministries can be lodged in the seminaries.

Q What message would you like to share with the LSTC community as you begin your time as Interim President?

Keep the faith and be confident God is with you in your mission. Continue being the faithful pilgrims the LSTC community has been since its formation. While you are unique and distinctive, there are many fellow travelers with whom you can share the journey up ahead. Don't expect the next president to be a miracle worker but offer that person the same warm welcome and generous support I have experienced in my early days among you. And when your new leader may be criticized, make haste to respond, "Actually, that is the interim's fault!"



IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP THE BIG PICTURE, MAINTAIN "SITUATIONAL AWARENESS" AND AVOID BEING DISTRACTED. IF THERE'S A THUNDERSTORM OR MOUNTAIN UP AHEAD, MAKE A PROMPT MIDCOURSE CORRECTION! A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR TO SAFETY IN THE SKIES HAS BEEN THE EMPHASIS ON "CREW RESOURCE MANAGEMENT" OR CRM, WHICH BASICALLY TEACHES PILOTS TO LISTEN TO ALL THE VOICES: CREW, PASSENGERS, [AND] AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS. THAT'S MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER AS WE NAVIGATE THE TURBULENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION THESE DAYS.

INTERIM PRESIDENT MICHAEL COOPER-WHITE

LSTC FACULTY, BOARD REAFFIRM COMMITMENTS TO ANTI-RACISM, DIVERSITY, JUSTICE

At its February meeting LSTC's Board of Directors unanimously endorsed a statement by the faculty, which underscores our school's unwavering support for students and staff, especially those targeted by the current administration in Washington.

The statement reiterates LSTC's commitment to anti-racism, social justice, eco-friendly measures, and support for all in the community, especially LGBTQIA+ and other persons now under duress. It decries attacks against marginalized people and promises efforts to foster dialogue and deescalate societal polarization. LSTC's statement reflects

our biblical/theological convictions in the God of love, mercy, and justice who calls the Church to public witness.

LSTC Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, Dr. Linda Thomas, who led the faculty in developing the statement, said, "Our faith calls us to love all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, experiences, or identities, embodying the principle that everyone is created in the image of God. This commitment is not about politics, but about living out the core values of empathy, respect, and dignity that we believe are essential for a thriving society."

Board of Directors Chairman Greg Lewis, Esq. said, "It's really important for us to take this action at this time." ❀

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THIS COMMITMENT IS NOT ABOUT POLITICS, BUT ABOUT LIVING OUT THE CORE VALUES OF EMPATHY, RESPECT, AND DIGNITY THAT WE BELIEVE ARE ESSENTIAL FOR A THRIVING SOCIETY.

DR. LINDA THOMAS LSTC VICE PRESIDENT AND DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

FACULTY STATEMENT ON POST- ELECTION CLIMATE

February 20, 2025

STATEMENT PREFACE

The faculty of LSTC expresses our commitment to fostering an inclusive and loving community based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Our faith calls us to love all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, experiences, or identities, embodying the principle that everyone is created in the image of God. This commitment is not about politics, but about living out the core values of empathy, respect, and dignity that we believe

are essential for a thriving society. By opposing any form of rhetoric or action that might marginalize or demean others, we reaffirm our dedication to creating a safe and welcoming environment for everyone in our community.

At the heart of our mission is our commitment to public church theology, which forms the foundation of our understanding of what God calls us to do and be in the world. This theology emphasizes that our faith should not remain confined to the church but must actively engage with the broader society. We believe that as a public church, we are called to advocate for justice, promote peace, and offer compassion, reflecting God's love in tangible ways.

LSTC FACULTY STATEMENT

We, the faculty of LSTC, wholeheartedly affirm our school's vision: "to build up the Body of Christ and work for a world of peace and justice that cares for all of creation." This distinctive public vision undergirds our teaching, advising, and scholarship, and we believe it is central to our collective mission within the LSTC community.

As we acknowledge the new presidential administration at the national level, we are mindful of the many challenges to our commitments and the values we hold dear. The new president has demonstrated a pattern of rhetoric and actions that express disdain for many, mainly targeting individuals based on religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, and national origin.

We recognize that this environment may pose real threats to members of the LSTC community, and especially our students.

Considering these concerns, we feel compelled to publicly voice our existing institutional commitments that inspire our work against potential harm. Remaining silent in the face of such challenges is a form of complicity, and we reject this response with every fiber of our being. We follow Christ's command to love our neighbors without exception.

Our commitment to a pluralistic democracy grounded in truth and justice compels us to teach and preach against White Christian Nationalism, exposing it as a dangerous ideology that undermines our shared values and humanity. LSTC pledges to continue embodying ecumenical and interreligious relations based on deep understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation for the common good, for example, in our work on Christian-Muslim Engagement.

Our dedication to anti-racism, exemplified through LSTC's Anti-Racism Transformation Team, drives us to pursue policies and practices that embody diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

These principles are woven throughout our Public Church curriculum, empowering students to embody anti-racist commitments in their ministry leadership.

As a part of LSTC's commitment to anti-racism, we are particularly obligated to uplift and support our international students,

who may be increasingly vulnerable in a national climate that targets those here in the United States from other countries, even when here with proper visas and documentation.

Our identity as a Reconciling in Christ seminary fuels our steadfast support for LGBTQIA+ members of the LSTC community. We express this commitment through our teaching, advising, and the hosting of significant events, such as the Queer Intersectionality Symposium.

Our commitment to environmental justice is integral to our faith, compelling us to care for all creation. We acknowledge the urgent threats climate change poses, particularly to marginalized communities disproportionately affected by its impact. As a community, we prioritize sustainability in our practices and pedagogy, advocating for ecological justice policies. In this endeavor, we seek to equip our students to become visionary leaders in environmental stewardship. We foster an understanding of the interconnections between social justice and our shared responsibility to protect the earth for future generations.

Governments that hold a preferential option for the very wealthy directly counter the church's public commitment to seek the flourishing of all members of our communities, especially those economically struggling. As we work for economic security and justice in our society, we recall as inspiration the Bible's "preferential option for the poor" and Jesus' claim that by serving those who

are hungry, thirsty, impoverished, sick, and imprisoned (Matt 25:40), we serve Christ.

Undergirding our whole enterprise, we acknowledge and support our collaborative role as an educational institution with a functional government oversight of education, including accreditation processes, oversight of equity (Title IX), and federal loan opportunities supporting students' educational goals.

These commitments are core to the institutional values we hold together at LSTC. Yet, we also desire to remain open to learning from others and to be in dialogue with those who hold perspectives different from our own. As one of our core values, we commit to listening to understand the other and to seek, where possible, paths to deescalate the polarization that characterizes so much of our public life at this moment.

We ask that the board officially join the faculty in making a bold and public declaration rooted in our Christian identity and moral commitments as a community. In this critical moment, we reaffirm our values, standing firmly for all who embrace the call of being a public church. 🌿

The LSTC Board of Directors voted unanimously to affirm this faculty statement on February 20, 2025.

IN THE FULLNESS

How LSTC's Queer Symposium and Homecoming offer a sacred space for our community

By Rhiannon Koehler

What if joy itself is an act of defiance? What if the simple act of gathering—of speaking, learning, and celebrating—becomes a radical assertion of dignity? These are the questions that animate the 2025 Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium at LSTC. Held alongside Homecoming from Monday April 28, – Wednesday, April 30, 2025, this year's symposium doesn't just offer a space for reflection; it invites participants into a living, breathing conversation about the intersections of faith, identity, and justice. Here, queer theologians, activists, and faith leaders come together not to provide easy answers, but to ask the kinds of questions that can foster sustainable, meaningful change.

THE BIRTH OF THE QUEER INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE PUBLIC CHURCH SYMPOSIUM

The Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium at LSTC was developed by Dr. Karri Alldredge, Assistant Professor of New Testament,

in response to student calls for deeper engagement with LGBTQIA+ identities in theological education and ministry preparation. It is sponsored by The Rev. Dr. Albert “Pete” Pero, Jr. and Rev. Dr. Cheryl Stewart Pero Center on Intersectional Studies and Thesis 96, a student group that shares a common belief that LGBTQIA+ people have the right to full participation in church, particularly the ELCA, including ordination. “The symposium is a concrete way for LSTC to live out its commitments to being a queer seminary where the gifts of queer folx are celebrated and essential to engaging the work of the gospel,” says Alldredge, who has shepherded the symposium from idea to institutional movement. “It invites students to move from engaging with written theology and theory to embodied dialogues and relationship building.” More than an academic exercise, the symposium is an extension of LSTC's Public Church commitment, fostering community, wisdom-sharing, and supporting concrete actions for justice.



Above: Dr. Karri Alldredge, Assistant Professor of New Testament



OF LIGHT



THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF QUEER JOY

This year, the symposium's speakers and participants will be working around the theme Queer Joy as Resistance. "Queer joy as resistance highlights the importance of joy in the lives of queer folx, celebrating their many acts of resistance and creativity," Alldredge explains. "Queer joy resists the notion that the lives of queer folx are only based in experiences of violence and trauma. It is a political statement, a counter-response to anti-trans/queer ideologies."

The symposium's theme also recognizes joy as a tool of collective liberation. "As [American writer, professor, philosopher, intersectional feminist, poet, and civil rights activist] Audre Lorde highlights, joy fuels action and transformation," says Alldredge. "Queer joy refuses to be silenced or erased. It delights in embodiment, intersectional justice, and transformation." This year's programming embraces joy not as an abstract concept but as an active force—one that sustains resistance movements and deepens faith-based activism.

KEY VOICES AND TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS

A major highlight of the symposium is its lineup of renowned scholars, activists, and faith leaders. Among them are Roberto Che Espinoza and Erin

LSTC alum Christina Montgomery and LSTC student Emily Moentmann speak at the 2024 Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium.

Law, co-founders of the activist group Our Collective Becoming. Dr. Espinoza, a non-binary transqueer Latinx scholar-activist and visionary thinker, will deliver a plenary address and lead workshops on sustainable community-building and activist theology. Law will guide participants in exploring the embodied, somatic experiences of queerness through workshops and performances. "We are intentionally centering focus on the church's role in promoting and protecting trans and non-binary joy, especially in our present political climate," Alldredge notes.

Workshops are structured into two tracks: Developing Awareness and Developing Resistance. "These workshops range from queering liturgy and interrogating allyship to queer intersectional activism to trans joy and the role of the church," says Alldredge.



The symposium challenges attendees to move beyond statements of support to embodied actions for justice. "LSTC, like much of the ELCA, needs to move beyond prayers and statements to concrete action... Alongside our commitments to anti-racism and the global church, we must demonstrate publicly and concretely our commitment to trans and queer rights."

HOMECOMING AND THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

This year, the symposium is intentionally intertwined with Homecoming, an annual event celebrating LSTC alumni and the broader

seminary community. By holding these events together, LSTC emphasizes its commitment not only to current students but also to queer alums and the broader faith community.

"Alumni panels and presence will help foster connections between present students and alums as well as to develop greater networks of collective action within the ELCA," says Alldredge. Homecoming participants will have full access to the symposium, allowing for meaningful intergenerational conversations about faith, justice, and advocacy.

The schedule includes



[THE SYMPOSIUM] ASKS THAT COMMUNITIES MOVE BEYOND THE WORDS OF WELCOME STATEMENTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS TO EMBODIED ACTIONS AND INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING TO FOSTER THE KIN-DOM OF GOD HERE ON EARTH.

DR. KARRI ALLDREDGE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT



class reunions, student creative expression workshops, and affinity group gatherings, culminating in an awards reception that honors distinguished alumni. Worship and prayer remain central, reflecting the deep theological grounding of both events.

A CALL TO ENGAGE

The 2025 Queer Intersectionality and the Public Church Symposium and Homecoming are not just events—they are a call to action. They invite participants to move beyond passive support into embodied practices of justice and solidarity. “The symposium seeks to help participants develop and

share skills for survival, thriving, and collective action,” Allredge affirms. “It asks that communities move beyond the words of welcome statements and social media posts to embodied actions and intentional relationship-building to foster the kin-dom of God here on earth.”

For those who believe in a faith that is active, inclusive, and justice-driven, this gathering at LSTC offers a powerful space for learning, connection, and transformation. It is a call of community, a reaffirmation of dignity and belonging, and a reminder to all that LSTC remains a safe space for all of our community members to celebrate the fullness of their authentic selves. 🌱



FAITH



“

WE DON'T NEED CHURCHES CREATING NEW MINISTRIES IF THERE'S A SHELTER DOWN THE ROAD THAT'S BEEN THERE FOR 25 YEARS DOING GOOD WORK,' WICKWARE STATES. "WHAT WE NEED IS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES TO JOIN THOSE ALREADY WORKING FOR JUSTICE AND AMPLIFY THEIR EFFORTS.

MARVIN WICKWARE, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CHURCH AND SOCIETY AND ETHICS

IN ACTION

How our theological principles drive social justice

By Rhiannon Koehler

At LSTC, our adherence to key theological principles forms the foundation of both academic and communal life, with social justice at the heart of our mission. We spoke to faculty members across disciplines to better understand how the seminary's commitment to justice, inclusivity, and community engagement, rooted in biblical values and scripture, guides our institution in addressing pressing contemporary challenges.

Social justice at LSTC is not an ancillary concern but a theological imperative, deeply embedded in its pedagogy and mission. Marvin Wickware, Associate Professor of Church and Society and Ethics, defines justice as “whatever conditions make it possible for people to be their fullest selves.” This involves removing barriers such as economic hardship, social exclusion, and discrimination that hinder people from thriving.

This perspective was echoed by Raphael Malpica-Padilla, Damm Chair in Leadership and Director of Latine Ministry and Theology.

“For decades, the ELCA has been walking together in accompaniment with the global Lutheran community,” he said. “In that journey, we have discovered five values that shape our work: mutuality, inclusivity,

vulnerability, empowerment, and sustainability. These are key values in forming religious leaders, particularly in the context of the rising of Christian nationalist and white supremacy ideologies.”

Karri Alldredge, Assistant Professor of New Testament, further emphasized LSTC's commitment to forming a community that is “contextualized, intersectional, and justice-focused.”

“We seek to engender a community where diversity is honored and celebrated, where we pay attention to who is marginalized or erased, and strive to work together for the wellbeing of all creation,” she explained.

Faculty at LSTC emphasize social justice as a biblical mandate, not a modern invention. Wickware pointed to the fundamental question posed in Christian theology today: Who is your neighbor? He explained that Christian nationalism often restricts the

concept of neighbor to those who are familiar or similar, while the biblical tradition consistently expands it.

“The Hebrew Bible repeatedly asks: ‘Are you caring for the widows, the orphans, and the strangers among you?’” said Wickware. “That is the true test of faith.”

Alldredge extended this perspective, drawing from Paul's teachings.

“Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12 that the body of Christ is one in which all members are honored, necessary, and cared for. It challenges colonial, imperialist, and capitalistic visions of worth based in hierarchy,” she said. “Instead, the body of Christ is queer, fluid, and disabled. It is comprised of individuals of all races and ethnicities, classes and castes. It seeks to remove the binaries and hierarchies of society.”

Malpica-Padilla further highlighted how misinterpretations of Christian doctrine have fueled exclusionary politics.

“About eight years ago, I was asked to make a presentation at a Lutheran World Federation consultation on Mission,” he remembered. “The question asked of me was to identify the major threat to mission. My response was

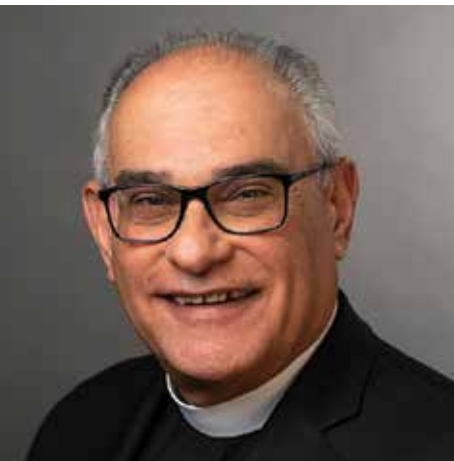
the rising of extreme right ideologies. This ‘movement’ is undergirded by misguided theologies that erode the basic values and tenets of the Christian faith. As Friedrich Schleiermacher affirmed, heresy is ‘that which preserves the appearance

“

THE BODY OF CHRIST IS QUEER, FLUID, AND DISABLED. IT IS COMPRISED OF INDIVIDUALS OF ALL RACES AND ETHNICITIES, CLASSES AND CASTES.

KARRI ALLDREDGE, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT





FOR DECADES, THE ELCA HAS BEEN WALKING TOGETHER IN ACCOMPANIMENT WITH THE GLOBAL LUTHERAN COMMUNITY. IN THAT JOURNEY, WE HAVE DISCOVERED FIVE VALUES THAT SHAPE OUR WORK: MUTUALITY, INCLUSIVITY, VULNERABILITY, EMPOWERMENT, AND SUSTAINABILITY. THESE ARE KEY VALUES IN FORMING RELIGIOUS LEADERS, PARTICULARLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RISING OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALIST AND WHITE SUPREMACY IDEOLOGIES.

RAPHAEL MALPICA-PADILLA, DAMM CHAIR IN LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTOR OF LATINE MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY

of Christianity and yet contradicts its essence.”

In the midst of such movements, LSTC prioritizes educating leaders who can navigate the complex intersection of faith and activism. Dr. Linda Thomas, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs and Bernard, Fischer, Westberg Distinguished Professor of Theology and Anthropology, noted that “leaders must prioritize values over immediate pressures to ensure actions align with beliefs,” referencing Exodus 18, in which Jethro advises Moses to delegate responsibilities wisely.

“Adaptability enables innovative solutions to competing priorities without compromising principles,” she explained, invoking the Book of Esther before drawing from the example of Jesus retreating for prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12; Matthew 14:13) to stress the importance of reflection and self-care in sustaining leadership.

Worship at LSTC also

plays a role in developing leadership, particularly through its collaborative approach, added Dr. Christian Scharen, Associate Professor and Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship.

“First, the team that leads chapel is student/staff/faculty, and because of that we work hard to draw students/staff/faculty into leadership week by week, so people see a diverse group of worship leaders over time,” he said.

At LSTC, leadership formation includes equipping students with practical tools for justice work. Wickware noted that community organizing methods are integrated into theological education.

“All of our master’s students take a course called Public Church I, [where we] introduce them to community organizing methods,” he explained. “It helps us to bridge the gap between caring about our community, between caring about the strangers among us, between caring about justice and actually being able to effectively work for justice.”

LSTC sees justice as a global commitment, one that extends beyond the United States, and, as Malpica-Padilla explains, “many professors

in theological institutions around the globe are graduates from our school.”

“We must continue to resource our global companions by deepening and extending their theological formation programs,” he says.

Additionally, the seminary emphasizes partnerships with communities facing systemic injustices. Malpica-Padilla notes that issues such as climate change and forced migration have become central to global ministry.

“As a church participating in God’s global mission, we sought to ‘walk and work together for the flourishing of the human community’... This work goes beyond an existentialist approach,” he says. “We join our global companions in their mission to serve a world in need.”

Allredge agrees, highlighting the ways LSTC fosters this global commitment through its academic programs and events.

“LSTC’s commitments to lifting up voices from around the globe both in the classroom and in its programming is essential to this work. I have witnessed it through

the Queer Symposium, the Vine Deloria, Jr. Theological Symposium, Black History Month, and Dalit History Month,” she says.

Faculty members stress that faith must be active, engaging communities in concrete justice work and meeting communities where they are.

“We don’t need churches creating new ministries if there’s a shelter down the road that’s been there for 25 years doing good work,” Wickware states. “What we need is for faith communities to join those already working for justice and amplify their efforts.”

In this regard, LSTC’s emphasis on responsiveness to context also plays a crucial role.

“We connect with alumni and friends as worship leaders at LSTC as well as going out into the community through Pray and Break Bread, honoring our value of responsiveness to context,” says Scharen. “And we draw upon preaching and worship



LEADERS MUST PRIORITIZE VALUES OVER IMMEDIATE PRESSURES TO ENSURE ACTIONS ALIGN WITH BELIEFS.

DR. LINDA THOMAS, VICE PRESIDENT AND DEAN OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS



classes to plan and lead Midday Prayer on Mondays as a way for them to grow and develop excellence in their formation as pastoral leaders.”

Through its curriculum, worship practices, and global engagement, LSTC fosters a model of theological education that does not separate faith from justice.

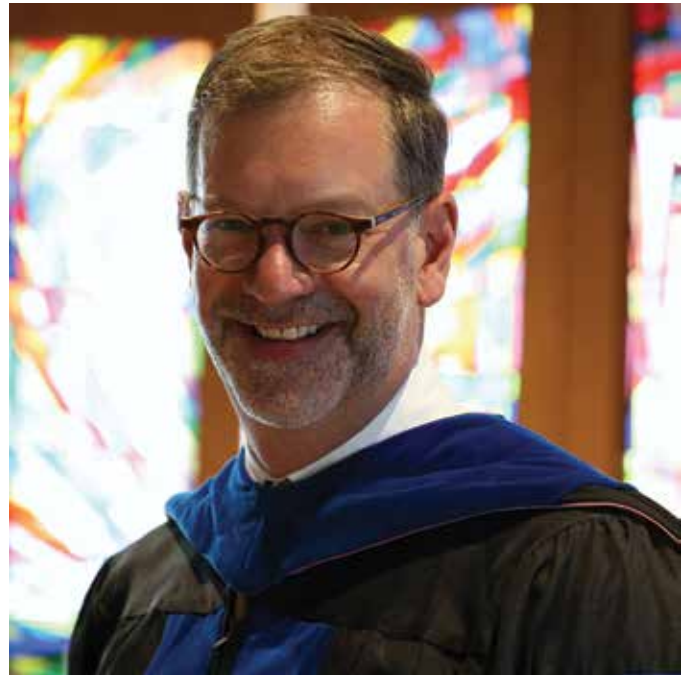
“There’s a need for people to see faith as accountable to other people’s wellbeing, not just to assumptions about what church is supposed to be,” Wickware concludes. And, as Alldredge notes, LSTC can be a part of meeting this need. “LSTC seeks to be in the world and respond to it. It aims to be ever more fluid and adaptive so that it can respond to the

political and social changes that are coming at an ever-alarming rate.”

LSTC affirms that justice is not an optional aspect of a Christian faith grounded in theological principles, but the very essence of it. ✝

“
**WE WORK HARD TO
DRAW STUDENTS/
STAFF/FACULTY INTO
LEADERSHIP WEEK
BY WEEK, SO PEOPLE
SEE A DIVERSE GROUP
OF WORSHIP LEADERS
OVER TIME**

CHRISTIAN SCHAREN, ASSOCIATE
PROFESSOR AND GORDON BRAATZ
CHAIR OF WORSHIP



Opening doors, changing lives

At LSTC, scholarships do more than cover tuition—they open doors to ministry, service, and leadership. On Giving Day, May 6, 2025, your gift directly supports students who are called to lead in diverse and dynamic ways.

From the **Visionary Scholarship Fund**, which provides immediate tuition assistance, to the **Emerging Leaders Fund**, supporting students of color and underrepresented communities, your generosity makes a lasting impact. You can also help international students through the **Global Leaders Fund** or provide vital support for TEEM learners through the **Project Starling Scholarship**.



Every gift moves a student closer to their calling. Scan the QR code to make a gift or return the enclosed envelope for your gift to be counted towards Giving Day.



WHO WERE THEN

Preserving our values in trying times

By **Rhiannon Koehler**

At LSTC, we are committed to our role as a Christ-centered institution that is responsive to our context, committed to excellence, and committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. How do we continue to preserve our values in these trying times?

Luther scholars and academic leaders are among the best placed to answer this pressing question. In an era marked by uncertainty, it isn't hyperbolic to identify this moment as key to the future of faith and practice in our country.

As Dr. Candace Kohli, Assistant Professor of Lutheran Systematic Theology and Global Lutheranism, reminds us, "We have to engage the Lutheran heritage critically... so we have the ability to identify when and how those socially constructive processes are at work. If we engage the history only nostalgically, not only do we miss that social construction process, but we actually participate in it and perpetuate [those harms]."



Dr. Linda Thomas, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs and Bernard, Fischer, Westberg Distinguished Professor of Theology and Anthropology

We may not be able to lean into the historical record for an unsullied hero of Lutheran tradition, but we can inject our values into our daily practices, as we have for centuries. Regardless of the ever-changing challenges we face in our evolving world, we can take daily action to ensure we are moving forward in alignment with our values. When other members of our greater community engage with us, it is in an arena of grace, understanding, and fairness, for we are a community that takes an unflinching look at our imperfect history and acknowledges our part in



Dr. Candace Kohli, Assistant Professor of Lutheran Systematic Theology and Global Lutheranism

making our world what it is today.

Today, our institution remains committed to anti-racism, acknowledging our past and present imperfections, and defying those influences driven by divisiveness. As Min. Vimary "Vima" Couvertier-Cruz, Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice, says, "[We have an] imperative to acknowledge, to honor, to embrace, and to serve justice in love for all of God's children in the wholeness, richness and complexities of who they are, honoring race,



Min. Vimary "Vima" Couvertier-Cruz, Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender, gender expression, abilities, age and/ or intersectionality." Leaning into our values remains a significant commitment. And it is an ongoing practice.

As Couvertier-Cruz explains, "During these times of rapid changes and challenges, it is crucial that we listen to how the members of our community are experiencing the school in their daily lives. As members of this community, we are responsible for taking care of each other, particularly those who are more at the margins."

So how do we do that? At

WE ARE NOW

LSTC, through our centers, initiatives, and faculty-led programming, we are committed to bringing opportunities for connection and engagement to our students, faculty, staff, and alums. We are intentionally oriented toward leadership, committed to principles that ultimately launch students toward careers making fundamental, actionable differences in the world. Dr. Thomas states, “LSTC’s curriculum connects theological subjects, such as biblical studies, constructive theology, Christian Ethics, theological intersectionality, church history, and Lutheran Confessions, to contemporary societal challenges. It incorporates discussions on social justice, sustainability, and congregational/community activism. This helps students see the relevance of their faith in addressing real-world issues, fostering a sense of responsibility.”

We celebrate our faculty, students, and staff for their work, and acknowledge that everyone has the opportunity to state who they are to the world in these times, and to do so loudly, publicly, and vulnerably.

This is how we live out our values. How are you living out yours? 🌱

SELF-CHECK FOR LIVING YOUR VALUES

This checklist can be used as a guide in your daily practice to observe how you’re embodying your own values. Reflecting on these questions can help you ensure your values remain a guiding force, even in trying times.

ASK

- ☐ Am I creating space for honest dialogue?
- ☐ Am I accountable for my actions?
- ☐ Am I contributing to the global good?
- ☐ Am I cultivating authentic relationships?
- ☐ Am I staying true to my core principles?
- ☐ Am I investing in resilience and leadership development?
- ☐ Am I engaging critically with my traditions?
- ☐ Am I hopeful and action-oriented?

GO DEEPER

- Do I actively listen to diverse perspectives and foster conversations across differences?
- Have I set measurable goals for personal growth in areas like inclusion, equity, and justice?
- Do I consider the global implications of my actions, such as their impact on climate, migration, or communities experiencing vulnerability?
- Do I prioritize collaboration and mutual learning in my relationships?
- In moments of pressure, do I anchor my decisions in faith and integrity?
- Do I take time to develop my skills and support others in their growth?
- Do I draw lessons from the past while adapting them to today’s challenges?
- Do I approach challenges with a belief in transformation and a commitment to positive action?

A photo of the Holy Land taken
by Dr. Linda E. Thomas.



BEARING WITNESS

Dr. Linda Thomas reflects on a pilgrimage to Palestine and Israel

When Dr. Linda E. Thomas was approached by Rev. Dr.

Waltrina N. Middleton of the Community Renewal Society to participate in a pilgrimage of African-American leaders to Palestine over a year ago, she was intrigued.

From the outset, the pilgrimage was centered on bearing witness. “Initially, I could not attend,” reflects Dr. Thomas, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs. “However, a year later, I confidently participated in the 142nd Annual Membership Assembly’s pilgrimage to Palestine this past November.” Alongside a group of over ten activists, Dr. Thomas traveled to one of the most severely war-torn regions to bear witness

to the ongoing genocide in Palestine. “Dr. Waltrina Middleton invited us because her connections in Palestine recognized that African Americans have a profound understanding of the struggles they are enduring,” Dr. Thomas asserted. The Community Renewal Society is an organization committed to transforming society towards greater social justice. In a powerful display of solidarity with those currently affected by violence in the region, Dr. Thomas embraced the invitation and delivered a compelling paper that contrasted the experiences of Palestinian women with those of African American women living under oppressive regimes.

“I’ll just cut it to the chase,” Dr. Thomas said when

recalling her time in Palestine: “This is an apartheid state. I’ve never seen such systemic evil in my life.” She recalls witnessing desperate poverty only a few kilometers from relative normalcy in commercial settings. She remembers simple concrete shelters wedged into public walkways beside bus stops outside of Gaza. She can still see the makeshift homes residents of Gaza created from simple cloth to protect their families from the human feces and detritus hurled into their living spaces by ultranationalist Israeli insurgents. And she remembers with heartbreaking clarity the stories of families with small children forced from simple tents in Gaza by radical Israeli youth with knives.



Dr. Thomas observed the crisis unfolding in the Middle East, from Jerusalem to the West Bank, Amman, and the edge of Gaza. She also experienced the physical manifestation of apartheid as separation—checkpoint crossings, barriers, and settlements—each symbolizing the daily struggles for safety and freedom. And once they crossed these fraught spaces, Dr. Thomas and her companions witnessed further brutality. “From the edge of Gaza, we could see the artillery going in because we could see plumes of smoke,” she remembers. Dr. Thomas and her group responded by praying over these sacred spaces, calling for peace and justice.

While most of Dr. Thomas’

time during the pilgrimage was spent traveling to different parts of Palestine with local guides, Dr. Thomas also presented a paper focusing on the intersection of struggles faced by Palestinian women and African American women in police states. She sought to bridge experiences across distinct yet overlapping struggles through her work. “I introduced my topic as a Womanist perspective,” she shared. “Women are clear bearers of our culture, whatever culture we happen to be in now.” By giving voice to these narratives, her presentation aimed to prompt theological reflection and foster solidarity in the face of shared injustices. Her work resonated with those in attendance; she

hopes to continue the project by interviewing Palestinian women about their experiences during this ongoing struggle.

Beyond academic discourse, the pilgrimage was enriched by personal encounters and community building. During the day, Palestinian merchants shared their art, creating spaces for dialogue and exchange. In the evenings, local community and group members’ presentations deepened the participants’ understanding of the complexities of daily life in these regions. “Through these interactions, it became clear that bearing witness is not a passive act—it is activism,” Dr. Thomas noted. Listening to local voices and engaging in mutual

learning are essential to reframing narratives shaped by geopolitical interests and biased reporting.

Throughout the pilgrimage, Dr. Thomas emphasized the importance of firsthand engagement. Traveling with those at risk, listening to scholars from the region, and supporting local voices are crucial steps toward a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of conflict zones. “To future scholars, faith leaders, and those committed to building a more just world, Dr. Thomas advises: “Go for yourself. You need to see the conditions on the ground for yourself. The news is biased by what media outlets want you to hear. But if you go for yourself, you will learn from people on the ground.” 🌿



bove: Sara Trumm, Director of LSTC's A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (CCME).

In the fall of 2024, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago hosted a delegation of 20 educators, scholars, and leaders from Indonesia as part of a certificate program on “Religion, Peace, and Encounter.” The two-month, interfaith program, an initiative of the American Islamic College’s (AIC) newly established Hassan Institute for Interfaith Council, proved to be a master class in the power of cross-cultural engagement, mutual respect, and curiosity.

LSTC’s involvement in the certificate program is a result

of the AIC’s newly established Hassan Institute for Interfaith Encounter. When Romana Manzoor, AIC’s Associate Vice President for Accreditation & Institutional Research and Effectiveness and Director of the Hassan Institute, learned that AIC received a grant to create the certificate program, she pitched the collaboration to Sara Trumm, Director of A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice at LSTC. It was an easy sell.

“‘Engagement’ and ‘encounter’ are key words for us,” said Trumm, “We’re always looking to bring Muslims and Christians together for learning and relationship-building.”

The result was a program offering academic coursework and experiential learning opportunities that included site visits to religious, academic, and civic institutions. Together, the institutions facilitated dialogue on topics like interreligious understanding.

Selected from over 200 applicants by Indonesia’s

Ministry of Religious Affairs, the visiting delegation was comprised of leaders in “pesantren”—Islamic boarding schools that combine religious and secular education with community development. Many were educators, while others were scholars, journalists, and community leaders. Their shared goal was to expand their work in interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding.

During their stay, the delegation engaged in numerous activities designed to foster learning and exchange. The on-campus curriculum included faculty-led academic sessions like Dr. Mark Swanson’s lesson on the Bible and Quran and interreligious scholarship. Site visits provided a means of exploring practical applications of interfaith collaboration and included such destinations as University of Chicago, Interfaith America, the MECCA Center, the Bahai Temple, the Muslim Civic Coalition, Darussalaam, and the Turkish American Society.

The delegation’s visit

coincided with key cultural and historical moments, including Halloween, Thanksgiving, and the beginning of the holiday season. Trumm said that sharing these events deepened the exchange.

“Experiencing the holidays with the delegation added significance for me in many ways,” she said. “It tested my knowledge and comfort in explaining the complicated historical development of traditions in Christianity, as well my ability to compare and contrast the religious and secular aspects of the various holidays.”

The delegation attended a panel on the moral responsibilities of faith leaders regarding issues in Palestine and Israel, as well as discussions on racism and social justice. These conversations, while challenging, proved beneficial to both communities, and the hard work was counterbalanced with plenty of fun, including a “culture night” where participants shared skits and songs.

“We tackled tough topics,

BUILDING BRIDGES

Lessons from the Indonesian delegation’s visit to LSTC

By Rhiannon Koehler

Members of the Indonesian delegation pose for a photograph upon their arrival.

but we also laughed, sang, and danced together,” Trumm noted, “There was a lot of laughter. I was really surprised at how relaxed and comfortable we all were with one another from the start.”

For LSTC students, the shared experience provided an opportunity for connection and meaningful engagement. As Master of Divinity student Erika Boss noted, “Food and celebration will inevitably bring people together.” In addition to their certificate, Boss completed the program with new friendships and global connections. They hope to one day travel to Indonesia to visit members of the delegation and credits the program for broadening their cultural horizons.

“There are places around the world that Americans could learn a lot from,” Boss concluded. “If more people could experience the pride of other groups singing their own national anthem, sharing their food, and telling stories about their home, then maybe we could see each other as more

human, as equally human as we see ourselves.”

The visit proved to be an exchange of knowledge and experiences. While LSTC community members offered insights into interfaith engagement from our Christian majority context, the Indonesian delegation shared their experiences with religious moderation and madrasa education.

“Their work in pesantren—teaching peacebuilding, conflict mediation, and interfaith dialogue—is something we can all learn from,” Trumm said.

LSTC Master of Theology student Venesia Hutabarat (a Christian from Indonesia) participated in the Indonesian Delegation’s activities and agreed with Trumm.

“I learned many lessons [from this experience], especially in [learning how to engage] interfaith cooperation to improve small things in our country such as environmental problems, interfaith issues, [and] theological issues,” said Hutabarat. “I hope

that all of us (Indonesian delegates and especially Lutheran churches) are always open to learning new things and working towards understand[ing] each other.”

For LSTC Master of Theology student Sweetry Noverlindra, who also hails from Indonesia, the opportunity to engage with like-minded students from her home country provided opportunity for meaningful discussion about the future.

“I am very grateful for this program because it gave me the opportunity to meet pesantren leaders from all over Indonesia,” Noverlindra said. “I found that we share the same dream of creating a peaceful Indonesia, especially in terms of interfaith relations... Therefore, [we hold] a significant responsibility as religious leaders and teachers in Indonesia to equip our congregations and students to bring about peace in the world, especially among different faiths.”

Coordinating schedules, navigating visa requirements, and addressing language and

cultural differences presented logistical challenges, yet the dedication of everyone involved turned these obstacles into exercises in flexibility and opportunities for deeper connection. As LSTC students reached out across the hallways of student housing to welcome their neighbors from Indonesia, friendship blossomed. As Boss noted, “the act of showing up goes a long way.” The new relationships demonstrated how interfaith engagement is not just about dialogue, but building a more just and peaceful world.

As LSTC continues its mission of preparing leaders for ministry in a global context, the Indonesian delegation’s visit serves as a model for future initiatives. LSTC plans to continue this program and others with the American Islamic College in the coming years as a means of reminding us that through encounter and engagement, we gain understanding, empathy, and hope.

For LSTC and its alumni, it’s a call to continue building bridges in a divided world. 🌱





CTU, LSTC, and the Niagara Foundation host the Annual Interfaith Iftar.



L to R: McCormick Theological Seminary's President Maisha Handy, LSTC Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs Dr. Linda Thomas, and student Martha Ambarangu at a Black History Month worship service.



LSTC Music Ministry Choir sings a song led by soloist Sara Trumm.



Attendees gather in the LSTC Chapel for prayer during the 2024 Vine Deloria Jr. Theological Symposium.



President and Professor Emeritus James Nieman pictured with Dr. Kristi Ferguson in the LSTC Commons, named in his honor.



The community honored President and Professor Emeritus James Nieman for his service to LSTC. He is pictured here at the Conclusion of Call ceremony with the Rev. Dr. Christian Scharen.



Interim President Michael Cooper-White joins Rev. Dr. Christian Scharen and students at the Life Together Center for a bi-weekly Dinner Church gathering.



Dr. Ken Sawyer of McCormick Theological Seminary pictured sorting through archives in the LSTC Rare Books room.



Students Megan Mong and Martha Ambarangu pictured at the annual Shrove Tuesday Pancake Celebration.



Members of the LSTC community gather in the Commons for an event reception.

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:



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



LSTC Alum Rev. Luanne Cantrell MDiv '11 at work.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT | LUANNE CANTRELL MDIV '11

ANSWERING THE CALL BEYOND THE PULPIT

By Rhiannon Koehler

Since earning her Master of Divinity degree from LSTC in 2011, Luanne Cantrell has forged a ministry path that exemplifies flexibility and faithfulness to God's call. As the Community Support Services Coordinator for the Channahon Fire Protection District in Illinois, Cantrell finds herself ministering not from a

pulpit but in the midst of crisis, providing comfort and resources to those navigating life's most challenging moments.

Cantrell's role, a culmination of eight years as a volunteer chaplain and her pastoral experience, was recently formalized into a full-time position. "I have been endorsed by the ELCA Chaplain Corps for specialized ministry

in the fire service," she shares, describing her work supporting residents during traumatic events like residential fires and medical emergencies. This unique calling is grounded in her ability to be "a calming presence in the face of chaos," a skill honed during her Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at LSTC. Reflecting on that formative summer, she likens it to

Dickens' famous line: "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times."

Cantrell credits her time at LSTC with shaping her resilience and adaptability. LSTC stretched her theologies and ideas beyond her comfort zone, but it also forged relationships and memories that remain dear to her today. "My favorite memories are hanging out with my classmates in the refectory and sharing stories and laughing," she recalls. "And my favorite professor was Dr. Kurt Hendel, and we are still friends today."

For Cantrell, ministry is both a confirmation and a challenge of vocation. While parish ministry once felt ambiguous, her current role offers clarity and purpose in every incident. "I know exactly what to do and why I am there handling each incident," she says. Her sense of calling is reaffirmed as she walks alongside individuals facing crisis, echoing LSTC's mission of working for peace and justice. "Crisis and trauma happen to everyone," Cantrell explains. "In my position, I'm there to provide comfort, encouragement, and tools to restore life to a sense of normalcy."

To those considering non-traditional ministry paths, Cantrell offers encouragement: "Listen to God's voice! Do what you feel God is calling you to do, even though it's outside the box of what's expected... That is your true calling."

Her advice for those discerning a call to seminary is equally heartfelt: "Go for it! Will it be hard? Yep. Will it be scary? Most likely. Will you be making an impact on people's lives for the better? Absolutely. And when you feel like you can't take one more step...remember God is right there walking with you." 🌿

J-TERM HIGHLIGHTS

THE PRACTICAL & THE PASTORAL

LSTC students explore the vital role of administration in ministry leadership

By Rhiannon Koehler

Behind every vibrant ministry is an infrastructure of strategic planning, thoughtful leadership, and administrative precision. For Lyndsay Monsen and Shemiah Curry, students in the 2025 J-Term Ministry of Administration course, these skills came into sharp focus

in exploring the unseen work that fuels impactful ministry.

Both Monsen and Curry were drawn to the course by its reputation. Monsen noted that she “had heard great things about the course from previous students,” and enrolled with the aim of strengthening her knowledge of finances and human resources. Curry, a graduating senior, saw the course as an opportunity to deepen her understanding of leadership and add to her theological library.

“I hoped to learn more about effective leadership

management in parish ministry and I was interested in adding books to my personal resource guide for future ministry,” she explained.

The course approaches administration as an integral component of ministry rather than a separate or secondary task.

“[We learned that] good ministry is impossible without effective administration,” Monsen said. “When the behind-the-scenes of a church is functioning well, all of its other programs are able to happen. I appreciate this mindset because administration is often viewed as boring or detached from ministry, but it’s quite the opposite.”

For Curry, the class offered an introduction to the Bowen Family Systems theory, which examines the emotional dynamics that influence church settings.

“The system suggests that there are 13 universal triggers for anxiety, and they are almost always present in churches... it is important for pastors to keep in mind how they respond to a member’s anxiety,” she said. “The goal is to be responsive versus reactive.”

Monsen observed that practical application of administrative skills was a recurring theme throughout the course.

“Administrative skills are everything when it comes to effective ministry leadership... if a church does not have any policies, it completely lacks a framework for their ministry

to [be successful],” she said. “Similarly, learning how to address conflict appropriately allows our interpersonal relationships to flourish, which is ultimately where ministry happens.”

Curry echoed this sentiment, adding that “Whether the parish pastor is trying to create the annual budget or navigate a meeting with council members, administrative skills are essential if you want the church to run smoothly.”

The course highlighted the balance between the practical and pastoral, with Monsen noting how intertwined the two are.

“Youth programs can’t happen without a balanced budget. Worship doesn’t happen without proper oversight of the worship committee,” she said. “I have learned that often the practical and the spiritual are intertwined.”

One key takeaway for both students was the importance of self-care and boundaries in ministry.

“[The class made me think about] how saying no can sometimes allow us to serve others better,” said Monsen.

For Curry, navigating conflict emerged as a vital skill.

“This course has made me think about conflict more and how pastoral leaders can navigate it. Conflict can arise because of financial issues at the church, new leadership, divorce, or even the selling of church property,” she explained.

The course also



Lyndsay Monsen and Shemiah Curry

HOW THE THEOLOGY OF JAMES CONE HELPS STUDENTS EMBRACE JUSTICE

underscored LSTC's commitment to preparing leaders for diverse ministry contexts.

"In this class, we each interviewed a pastor of a non-white, struggling, or rural congregation," recalled Monsen. "Hearing my classmates share about those interviews brought a great deal of depth into the classroom and reminded me of just how diverse the church is."

Curry appreciated the diversity within the class itself.

"Our cohort included students from four different seminaries and various religious backgrounds. Being able to hear perspectives from students whose experiences are very different than my own is a great introduction to the diversity in the world," she said.

Both students encouraged other seminarians to prioritize courses like this in their formation.

"I have heard from a lot of pastors sentiments of, 'they didn't teach me this in seminary...' and I do feel like taking this course will prevent me from having some of those moments in the future," said Monsen.

Curry agreed, pointing out that the foundational knowledge of topics like property taxes or nonprofit status can make a significant difference in ministry.

Ultimately, the Ministry of Administration course equips future church leaders to embrace the behind-the-scenes work that sustains vibrant ministries. By integrating practical skills with theological principles, it reflects LSTC's mission to prepare leaders for impactful service in an ever-changing world. 🌱

By Marvin Wickware

At LSTC, we invite students to embrace their calls—to pastoral ministry, chaplaincy, organizing, teaching, and beyond—as calls to public church leadership. Through our public church curriculum, we strive to help our students develop as leaders who not only proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ but also lead their communities in the lives of loving, justice-seeking discipleship into which Jesus guides us.

Our passionate, faithful students embrace this call to public church leadership...and find themselves caught between two seemingly incompatible demands. On the one hand, personal convictions grounded in their theologies and identities orient them toward a pursuit of radical love and liberative justice. On the other hand, realities in their communities or nations make the full, lived out expression of their convictions dangerous and possibly ineffective.

I teach students who know transgender children are beloved by God and that those who extend gender-affirming care to them are doing God's holy work, but who live in states that call such sacred work child abuse. I teach students who feel called to lead their churches in the work of justice, but who come from countries with governments that actively persecute Christians.

I teach students who understand antiracist work as a natural extension of Jesus' command to love our neighbors, but who expect to serve churches whose members eagerly support an openly racist president.

So, this January—considering this seminary's educational commitments and considering my students' situations—I taught a course on the theology of a beloved mentor of mine: James Cone.

Cone is known as the father of Black liberation theology, a theological perspective that holds the proclamation of the gospel accountable to the lived realities of Black communities. Cone named God as a God of liberation, powerfully present in the suffering, resistance, love, and beauty of Black life.

It's likely obvious how studying Cone could equip students to satisfy the first of those two demands. Cone proclaimed an uncompromising message of justice and liberation, locating Jesus among the marginalized and oppressed, then calling the church to show up where Jesus was to be found. Cone offers my students a model for proclaiming a message of radical love and justice with confidence.

Just as importantly, though, studying Cone equipped my students to confront that second challenge alongside the first. Specifically, they studied not only what Cone wrote but also his theological method. That is, *they studied how Cone engaged in theological reflection.*

At the heart of James Cone's theological method



was a two-part task: to discern the problem at the heart of one's community and to proclaim a *gospel* message that speaks to that problem. My students practiced this theological method, putting the Bible and other key theological sources in conversation with the questions that arise from their communities. My students discerned what makes people in their communities need to turn to God—or feel like they have to turn away from God—and articulated gospel messages that speak to those problems. Some of these messages were loud and bold, while others were subtle and gentle. Some were critical and convicting, while others mixed all of the above.

Through this course on James Cone's theology, I didn't teach my students to sound like Cone, *unless their context calls them to do so*. Rather, I helped them learn to do what Cone did on a deeper level: respond meaningfully to their communities with a theologically rich message their people need to receive. 🌱



A UNIFYING FORCE

The transformative role of music at LSTC

By Sarah Brooks

Students at LSTC come from more than 60 countries, bringing diverse backgrounds, identities, and perspectives to their work in ministry. For many students who hail from disparate environments and contexts, music serves as a bridge, connecting them and deepening their faith.

Talented musician, composer, and conductor Dr. Keith Hampton has witnessed this fellowship unfold at LSTC for more than 20 years. As LSTC's esteemed Cantor to the Seminary Community, he leads the college through prayer and music in twice-weekly worship services on Mondays and Wednesdays. Hampton's role involves honoring the musical traditions of each culture through song. He hopes that all feel

comfortable in LSTC's space of worship.

"I'm a firm believer of 'music of the people,'" said Hampton. "LSTC is global, so I have the opportunity to do so many different things with our worship services."

LSTC's commitment to social justice ripples through its musical offerings, even extending to the vernacular Hampton uses in services. He champions inclusive language when referring to God and is mindful of when to sing or not to sing Alleluia during

Lent based on cultural norms and practices. Additionally, Hampton shared that some individuals have contested song-label assignments restricted to "men" or "women." Instead, he asks singers to identify their voice as high or low—bass, tenor, soprano, or alto—and choose the part they're most comfortable singing.

To keep offerings fresh and expansive, Hampton plans, coordinates, and leads the LSTC music ministry, a group that exemplifies the

college's traditions of faith and social justice through their musical repertoire.

"One week might be gospel oriented, another will feature handbells, the next will showcase the flute and guitar," he explained. "That's to give us a sense of musical diversity."

Worship services also connect to larger themes that emphasize LSTC's mission of elevating Black history, women's history, LGBTQIA pride, and Indigenous and Asian heritage. As a means

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DR. KEITH HAMPTON, CANTOR TO THE SEMINARY COMMUNITY



Above: Keith Hampton in action—sharing music, joy, and community at LSTC.

DR. CANDACE KOHLI PUBLISHES NEW BOOK ON HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

By Rhiannon Koehler

How do Christians engage in ethical action after justification? Dr. Candace Kohli, Assistant Professor of Lutheran Systematic Theology and Global Lutheranism at LSTC, tackles this longstanding theological question in her new book, *In the Spirit: Human Subjectivity Under Law and Gospel*, published by Wipf and Stock in November 2024.

Kohli's study revisits Martin Luther's theology, particularly his late-career disputes over law and gospel, to explore how Lutheran thought can reconcile the believer's passivity in justification with their active moral responsibility in daily life. This work, which is deeply rooted in historical theology and philosophy, offers a fresh perspective on the interplay between faith, agency, and ethical action.

For Kohli, the problem begins with the way Lutheran theology has traditionally framed justification. "If humans are entirely passive in justification, then what you have is a coercive model," she explains. "If consent or reciprocity isn't part of the equation, then there are...troubling ethical implications [to our contemporary understanding of Luther's

works]." Kohli argues that traditional understandings of Luther's theological framework leaves Lutheran ethics without a strong philosophical foundation for moral action, leading to a contradiction in how faith and works are understood.



Many Lutheran theologians have sought to resolve this issue by citing Luther's 1520 treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian," in which he claims that Christ's love "springs spontaneously" from the believer's soul.

However, Kohli finds this explanation lacking. "There has to be interplay between the soul and the body, between the inner processes in the mind and what you actually do with your body," she says. After all, if humans are completely passive in justification, then logically, they should be passive in ethical action as well. Such a dichotomy could lead to misunderstandings that creates a kind of theological dead-zone where believers are moved by an outside force without agency or participation—a zombie apocalypse, if you will, of Christian theology.

In service of her larger argument, Kohli's research highlights an overlooked shift in Luther's later work. She notes that dominant interpretations of his theology have been shaped disproportionately by his early, polemical writings—particularly those surrounding his excommunication. "More than 75% of the Luther texts included in modern anthologies come from this period," she says. "Meanwhile, the final 20

years of his life, [when his views became more nuanced and in many ways more aligned with medieval Catholic thought], get only scant attention."

This oversight, Kohli argues, has led to an incomplete understanding of Lutheran theology, particularly regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. "Luther actually used Aristotelian metaphysics and he did engage with Catholic thought," she explains. By reexamining Luther's later works, Kohli provides theological resources that bridge justification and moral action in sanctification, offering a more coherent understanding of Christian subjectivity.

Though her book is primarily intended for scholars of Luther and historical theology, Kohli hopes it will challenge broader assumptions within Lutheran identity. "We often move too quickly from talking about the human to talking about Imago Dei to talking about Christ," she says. Kohli's work argues for establishing a framework that affirms human dignity and agency rather than dissolving it into Christology. Otherwise, as she argues, we risk losing the particularity of human beings in both theology and ethics.

With *In the Spirit*, Kohli contributes to ongoing theological discussions about faith, agency, and sanctification, prompting scholars to rethink how Luther's work informs contemporary Christian life. The book is available now through Wipf and Stock Publishers. 🌿

of connection, Hampton selects music from each culture's traditional genres and encourages the choir to sing at least one verse in the song's native language before moving to English.

In every service, "I would say that we are being led and guided by the Holy Spirit," Hampton said. "The power of music speaks for itself. We don't always have to rehearse it. We often receive and participate in the music, allowing it to flow from within us."

All are welcome at LSTC's worship services. Monday's service showcases meditative prayers and scripture reading for 30 minutes, while Wednesday's Eucharistic service lasts one hour and features specially prepared music by the LSTC music ministry. 🌿

By Adolfo Luna

Rev. Dr. Brooke Petersen understands the profound mental health needs of today's communities. Petersen, who holds the John H. Tietjen Chair of Pastoral Ministry, also believes that addressing mental health and trauma are part and parcel of the healing pastoral caregivers can offer. Through her dual expertise in pastoral care and clinical therapy, Petersen is preparing a new generation of church leaders at LSTC to meet contemporary challenges with courage and compassion.

"Moments of joy and deep suffering are intertwined in ministry," Petersen reflects, recalling her early days as a parish pastor. These experiences sparked deeper questions, especially following the ELCA's 2009 decision to ordain queer clergy. This milestone brought queer individuals into the church in greater numbers, including the trauma many had endured in previous faith settings. To better understand and address this lived experience of LGBTQIA+ individuals, Petersen focused the topic of her PhD research on religious trauma.

"The language of trauma fit the experiences that some queer people were bringing with them," Petersen explains. Her work highlights how religious trauma manifests—feeling unsafe, a lack of focus, and disconnection—and how healing unfolds when inclusive spaces allow individuals to reclaim their narratives. Her book, *Religious Trauma: Queer Stories in Estrangement and Return*, examines these dynamics and offers practical insights for pastors and religious communities to help marginalized individuals find reconciliation and healing

HEALING RELIGIOUS TRAUMA THROUGH MINISTRY

Rev. Dr. Brooke Petersen is preparing a new generation of church leaders to meet contemporary challenges

within faith communities.

"One needs to engage in explicit welcome – naming in a variety of ways that queer people are welcomed, beloved children of God," Petersen says. This involves displaying visible symbols of welcome, participating in advocacy for marginalized groups, and repentance for the harms done by religion in the past. "We must help people reclaim their narratives and find love and connection where there was once rejection," Petersen says.

At LSTC, Petersen integrates theological and clinical mental health principles. "Many people will turn to a pastor before seeking a therapist for their distress," she notes. This underscores the importance of equipping clergy to recognize mental health challenges and to destigmatize seeking professional help. Petersen emphasizes that while pastors are not therapists, they play a critical role in bridging the gap. "We can offer the power of prayer, but also encourage clinical support as one of the tools God makes available to us," she says.

As the Director of

Candidacy at LSTC, Petersen also teaches students about the importance of self-reflection and personal wellness. She believes addressing one's own mental health is not optional but central to effective ministry. "Mental health is not a side project; it is the project. You can't model wellness for others if you haven't done the work yourself," she says.

Historically, pastoral care has focused on providing individual care, especially through stress or suffering. Petersen, however, sees opportunity in a broader approach; pastoral care that acknowledges collective struggles and societal injustices. Drawing on theologian Carroll Watkins Ali's framework, she encourages students to consider the ways in which pastoral care can be nurturing, empowering, and liberating for individuals and congregations.

"For example, when students hear of policies that deny the existence of trans individuals, that is a call to respond," she explains. For Petersen, pastoral care involves addressing systemic issues like racism,

transphobia, and the rise of Christian nationalism because they cause suffering in communities and impact our collective wellbeing. "Our faith is not just an inside job—it's an outside job. We must speak words of grace and truth in the public sphere," she says.

Looking ahead, Petersen sees the integration of clinical pastoral care with traditional frameworks as a key trend within the field both inside and outside the ELCA. She also highlights the need for clergy to address the mental health crisis and resist forces that marginalize vulnerable communities.

"The needs of the world are immense," Petersen concludes. "Whether the issue is about politics, climate change, or social issues, we can't shy away from speaking truth to power. We must speak words of mercy and grace to remind the world of God's love in the face of its deepest struggles."

At LSTC, Petersen's work is transforming pastoral care into a practice of liberation, healing, and hope, meeting the needs of a changing world with faith and resilience. 🌱



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SPHERE.**

REV. DR. BROOKE PETERSEN,
JOHN H. TIETJEN CHAIR
OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

A man with glasses and a slight smile, wearing a blue and black academic robe, is speaking into a microphone. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is bright and out of focus.

FRESH EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH

Creating new pathways for innovation
in theological education

By Alisha Green

Over the last three decades, Rev. Dr. Christian Scharen has seen a precipitous decline in the church and theological education. Younger people in particular have shown increasingly high rates of disaffiliation. These discouraging trends sparked Scharen's ongoing research journey to seek new approaches and innovation with forms of church and theological education.

"One of the questions for me was, if the traditional way the church functions is working for fewer and fewer people, then what do we do? What's an alternative? It quickly made me interested in what has been

Rev. Dr. Christian Scharen, LSTC Associate Professor and Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship: "If the traditional way the church functions is working for fewer and fewer people, then what do we do? What's an alternative?"

called ‘fresh expressions of church,’” said Scharen, who is Associate Professor and Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship at LSTC.

Scharen went looking for answers in his research. He wanted to understand where the Holy Spirit stirs up disruptive new forms of Christian community — like the “Wild Church Network” congregations that worship in nature and do environmentally focused activities together — and go beyond struggling “business as usual” models.

Through his work studying emerging churches, Scharen brought two ongoing grants with him when he joined LSTC in July 2024, both related to changing theological education by paying attention to experimental communities and understanding how to meet their leadership needs. In August 2023, he was awarded a four-year, \$1.25 million grant for Pilot Studies of the Church’s Future as part of the Lilly Endowment Compelling Preaching Initiative. It focuses on fostering networking and peer-to-peer learning for new experimental communities.

To inform that networking and learning, Scharen recruited a cohort of 25 faith communities around the country affiliated with the

ELCA. A central theme he has heard so far in talking with people in new experimental communities is that they often feel alone in what they are doing.

“They don’t know who else is doing that kind of experimentation, and they really want opportunities to gather and learn from each other,” Scharen said.

Scharen is already making connections among the communities.

“It is inspiring to connect with and see the ways in which these communities are finding their gifts and organizing around sharing those gifts,” Scharen said. “They’re really responding to the time we’re living in in beautiful ways.”

Scharen was then awarded an 18-month, \$50,000 grant in November 2023 from the Missional Church Leadership Formation Network as part of the Lilly Endowment-funded Ministry in the City Hub Initiative at City Seminary of New York City. Scharen brought that grant with him when he joined LSTC last year, working with Vice President for Enterprise Innovation Keisha Dyson and a market research firm to host a series of focus groups with experimental communities last fall. Findings from these

focus groups will support development of new educational offerings by LSTC, including such topics as adaptive leadership, social entrepreneurship, nonprofit management, trauma-informed practice, and experimental resources for worship and music.

Most recently, LSTC was awarded a \$50,000 planning grant from the Lilly Endowment’s Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative last fall. That grant, written by Scharen and President and Professor *Emeritus* James Nieman, is focused on strengthening and sustaining institutional capacities to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches. The planning grant will help with writing a subsequent \$1 million implementation grant from the same initiative, which LSTC will submit this May.

“The Lilly Endowment wants to support initiatives that strengthen seminaries so they can be durable institutions into the future and support the well-being of the church. That means seminaries

that are financially stable, programmatically stable, and stable in terms of mission and vision,” Scharen said.

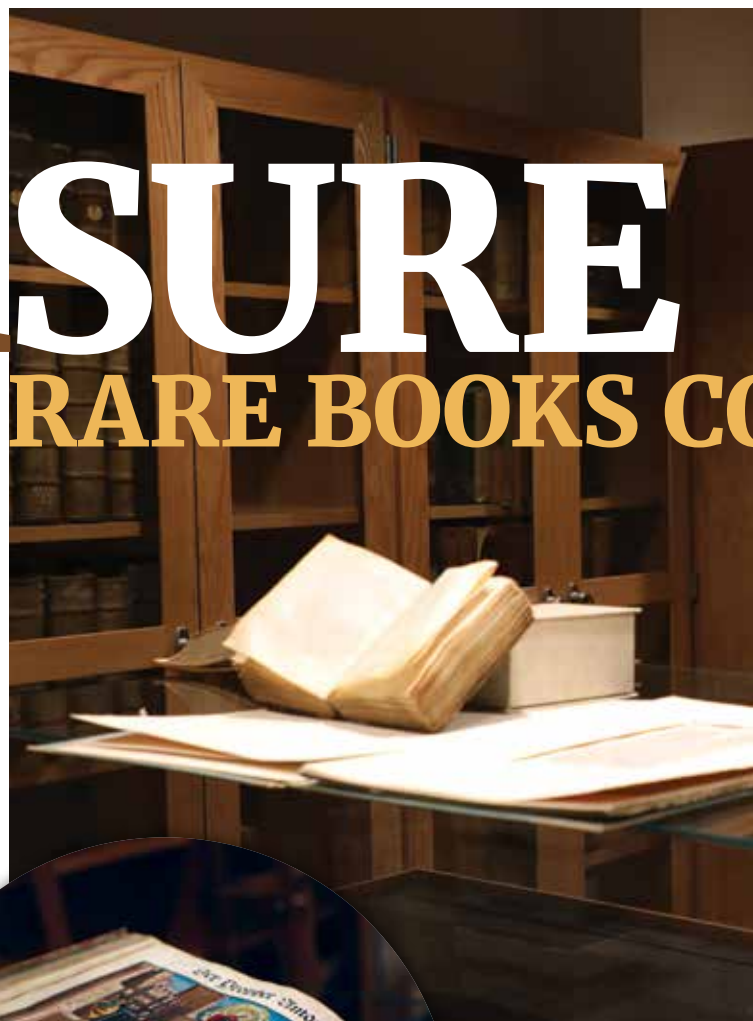
The new Lilly Endowment planning grant will fund several months of work overseen by LSTC Vice President Dr. Linda Thomas, Scharen, and others at LSTC with a goal of “recentering the community of accountability for the seminary,” as the grant proposal put it. Dr. Thomas is Dean of Academic Affairs at LSTC, Director of the Rev. Dr. Albert “Pete” Pero, Jr., and Rev. Dr. Cheryl Stewart Pero Center on Intersectionality Studies, and the Bernard, Fischer, Westberg Distinguished Professor of Theology and Anthropology.

“Historically, the community of accountability for LSTC has been the denomination, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” Scharen said. They provided parameters for training pastors for the church who could serve in any given community; pastoral leaders were seen as easily interchangeable from one place to another.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35



DEVELOPING THE TREASURE OF THE RARE BOOKS CO



By Alisha Green

Nestled on the fourth-floor home of the LSTC, the Rare Books Collection display room holds more than a thousand volumes related to New Testament and Reformation Studies. Still, the room represents only a fourth of the larger Rare Books Collection at LSTC, which includes over 4,500 total items and more than 1,200 years of theology and history inscribed on sheepskin, vellum, and paper.

The collection is a treasure that President and Professor Emeritus James Nieman wants to ensure is preserved and accessible to all.

“A rare books collection sounds like it’s really ancient, only about yesterday and without any current value,” Nieman said. “So it gets ignored. My concern is that it has been one of the most underutilized resources the school has.”

Nieman decided that he wanted to revitalize the collection prior to his January 2025 retirement.

“We’re in the unusual position to do something to develop a portion of the world that we have as a treasure right now,” he said.

The Rare Books Collection Campaign launched in



November 2024 with a goal of raising \$250,000 for cataloging the collection, improving its accessibility, ensuring its preservation, and adapting it for modern educational needs like asynchronous online learning. An updated and flexible website for the collection, which is currently

in development, will allow people around the world to access the materials.

“We have all kinds of documents, and people have no idea that we actually have them right here,” Nieman said.

Nieman acknowledged that managing and organizing the collection can feel overwhelming. The goal is to organize the material in a manner that maximizes its educational benefit. The next step for the collection is comprehensive, searchable cataloging. The rare books that are not presently in the display room are in climate-

COLLECTION



controlled storage, and Nieman is eager to make the collection more accessible to LSTC students, faculty, staff, and campus visitors.

"There are many uses for this material that have never been realized," he said. "We can finally produce and share some amazing educational products and asynchronous materials that people can engage with and enjoy."

Although a small portion of the collection, mainly related to studies of the New Testament, has been digitized for wider use, there are some details on the page that are best appreciated in person.

"Digitization can't possibly pick up some of the

qualities of the page and of the writing that are actually there when you physically examine a text," he said.

"We've had scholars come and see something in person that they could never see by just looking at an artifact on the screen."

Nieman added that preserving these materials shows respect for the past.

"I think about the number of hands through which a particular document went, folks whose hands held this thing, under different conditions, amidst varied situations of life, in the midst of war or peace, during worship either joyous or sorrowful," he said. "There's a lot of human story here." 🌿

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33

"We're trying to shift that, so the community of accountability is the communities from which students come and the communities to which they are sent as leaders in the church," Scharen added. "We want to move from thinking about training an individual leader for a community to supporting leadership formation for communities over time, helping support and form the work they're doing."

The shift involves deep listening to understand more about the specific leadership needs of local communities, then developing an education centered on the skills their leaders need to meet that unique mission and vision.

Scharen said a mix of faculty and staff at LSTC are working on the effort. They will hold a series of conversations with experts on institutional leadership in theological education, along with gathering focus groups of people from faith-based organizing groups, Latiné ministries, and new experimental communities. They will listen to what those communities need and what kinds of leadership training would be most beneficial to helping them meet their goals.

"That will create a path for developing new initiatives that really center the learners, the communities, and the needs they have," Scharen said. "It shifts our whole culture around who

our communities of accountability are."

If Lilly Endowment awards the larger implementation grant to LSTC, it would help LSTC pursue "a public church curriculum that is very aware of intersectionality" and meets people where they are, said Dr. Thomas.

"We know there are people with a lot of knowledge that comes from living their lives, and they have a robust spirituality," Dr. Thomas said. "So what would it mean if theological education was open to everyone at whatever level they are educationally?"

That intersectional approach would empower pastoral leaders to better connect with a diverse range of communities and lived experiences, such as people who have disabilities or are experiencing homelessness.

"All people are blessed with being children of God and are called to have access to equality and equity. The grant will help us to pursue those wrapped up in a curriculum," Dr. Thomas said.

Dr. Thomas added that, given the rapid pace of change, "we have to pay attention to it and be open to different ways of teaching."

Across all of the grants, the efforts help assess what is on the horizon for how people are gathering in meaningful Christian community or spiritual community.

Currently, LSTC offers few resources these communities say they need, and those they offer are inaccessible to all but a few.

"These grant projects are helping us understand how we can better partner with them and offer the resources they say they need in the most accessible forms possible," Scharen said. 🌿

ADVANCING THE CAMPAIGN TO REIMAGINE, REINVENT, REAFFIRM, AND RENEW THE LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO

By Alisha Green

When Sandra Nelson started her role as Vice President for Advancement at LSTC in 2020, it was a time of immense change. She was the first person hired at LSTC during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the world was shifting to online work and learning. It provided an opportunity for LSTC to pivot, too, and find a model that would best serve a rapidly changing world.

That is part of why Project Starling, a new program that aims to meet seminary students where they are through asynchronous online learning, is so exciting to Nelson.

"If you think of where we were then in 2020, to where we are now launching a platform that has a vision of

a very high-quality online education, we have come a long way," Nelson said.

Project Starling is exciting many members of the LSTC community, according to Nelson and other members of the advancement team. Thanks to a generous \$1.5 million gift made in the fall, Project Starling is gearing up for a June launch date. It will help ensure the seminary can provide distance learning for students.

Project Starling is one pillar of the ongoing philanthropic campaign to reimagine, reinvent, reaffirm, and renew the seminary. The campaign, which began in May 2023, has raised more than \$6 million so far ahead of its May 2026 wrap-up.

Along with launching Project Starling, the campaign for LSTC is

advancing scholarships for students, support for faculty, interreligious centers for cooperation, and expanded leadership training through initiatives like the new Damm Chair in Leadership, which equips students with crucial abilities in strategic planning, nonprofit management, and transformational change.

The campaign pillars work together to "launch the school into the future," said Jennifer Stone, Director of Advancement Services at LSTC.

The advancement team is working to spread that message with previous donors, new donors, and potential donors alike. Part of their communications effort has centered on explaining the exciting direction LSTC is moving in and the vision behind it.

"It is a lot of change, and it can be a little bit surprising for

people," said Ariana Strahl, Philanthropic Engagement Officer at LSTC. "We're talking about moving forward in ways that are updated to this time we're all living in."

The message is clearly resonating. Some donors are in a position to make one-time gifts of hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, and some are giving regular amounts monthly or making a three-year pledge. Many donors who had contributed before the campaign decided to increase their gifts.

"It really shows they are invested in what we're doing and the direction we're going," Stone said. Every gift, regardless of size, makes a difference in the effort to reimagine, reinvent, reaffirm, and renew the seminary, she added.

For Stone and others on the advancement team, it is rewarding to work on the campaign for LSTC and support its mission of forming visionary leaders for the ELCA.

"We are moving in a positive direction to make the school successful and sustainable for the long-term," Stone said. 🌱

Advancement Services Manager Jennifer Sone (left), Advancement Operations Coordinator Alicia Jakubowicz (center), and Philanthropic Engagement Officer Ariana Strahl (right) gather in the LSTC Commons, recently dedicated to President and Professor Emeritus James Nieman.



LSTC'S PROJECT STARLING GEARS UP TO MEET EVOLVING MINISTRY NEEDS



By Keisha Dyson

In a historic move, the ELCA has begun to reimagine the candidacy process for ordination and rostered ministry, responding to the evolving needs of the church and its leaders. This initiative, spearheaded by the Candidacy Working Group, was formed under the leadership of Bishop Susan Candea and ELCA staff members Phil Hirsch and Sara Cutter.

The group began its work in March 2022 with a bold charge: to refresh the candidacy process and produce an updated candidacy manual by Summer 2025. As part of the process, the group has proposed sweeping changes that aim to provide clearer paths to leadership, expand flexibility in the formation process, and incorporate new learning structures to ensure future church leaders are well-equipped to serve.

The proposal, released in October 2024, recommends a significant shift toward competency-based assessments rather than relying solely on traditional educational requirements, such as the Master of Divinity degree. This suggested change is in direct response to growing demands for leaders who can serve in diverse contexts, including the increasing role of Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs).

Research conducted by the ELCA on the use of Synod-Authorized Ministers revealed that SAMs have become indispensable in many congregations and ministries, particularly in areas with limited access to ordained pastors. However, these leaders often face challenges related to training, support, and recognition. The candidacy proposal emphasizes connecting SAM competencies with those of ordained ministers, ensuring that all leaders share a common framework for formation, leadership, and service.

While the final guidelines won't be available until later this year, LSTC is readying itself to partner with synods in response to the new candidacy process. Gearing up for this change, the seminary is creating a series of innovative learning resources that will support the educational needs of future rostered ministers, including SAMs. These resources are designed to provide essential tools for theological and ministerial formation.

LSTC's new resources will address core areas such as biblical engagement, Lutheran theology, pastoral care, public worship, and leadership practices while also touching on the more practical aspects of ministry within the Church such as leadership, pastoral care, and church administration.

These modules, designed by LSTC faculty, will be crafted with the understanding that ministry



today requires adaptability and contextual awareness. SAMs, in particular, will benefit from these resources, as they will have the flexibility to pursue formation that suits their unique context while still meeting the same high standards as those in traditional seminary programs.

The learning modules from LSTC will be delivered in an asynchronous format through LSTC's Project Starling platform, which launches in June, making them accessible to those who might not be able to attend a traditional seminary. Candidates will be able to engage with content at their own pace, but with structured assessments

to ensure they are demonstrating competency. The new process is designed to ensure that all candidates, whether for ordination or SAM status, are adequately prepared for the demands of leadership, whether they serve in rural congregations, urban centers, or as part of the growing global Lutheran community.

These resources will not only support the theological education and contextual learning needs of candidates but also provide an opportunity for lifelong learning and spiritual growth. To find out more about these resources or LSTC's Project Starling, visit LSTC.edu/starling or contact Keisha Dyson at keisha.dyson@lstc.edu.



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