

Former tech professional finds a new calling and a new kind of seminary

ELCA Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry: A return on investment

10 LSTC alumni bishops are leading a changing church



epistle

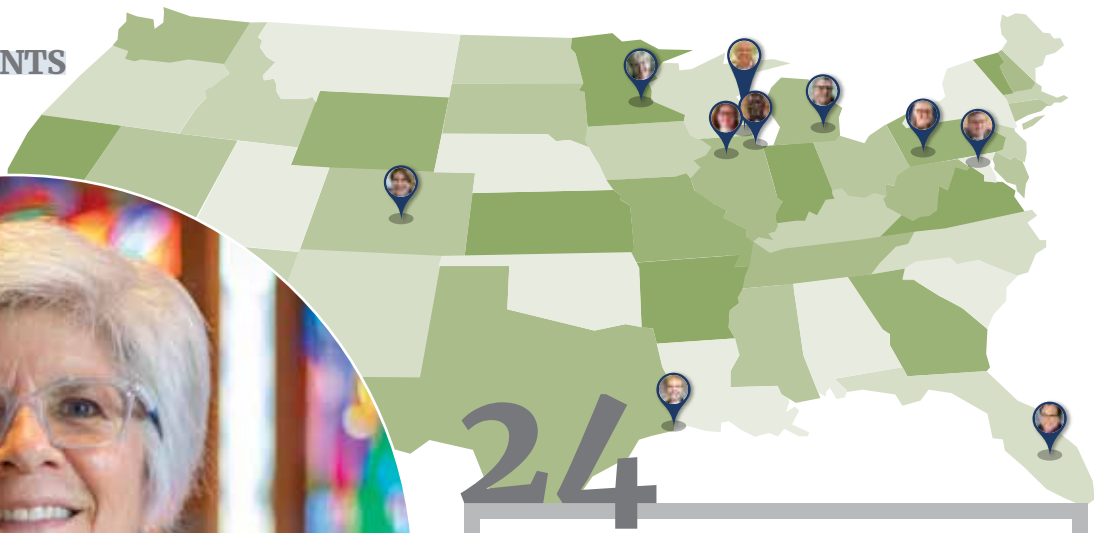
WINTER 2025

The magazine of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



PROMISE, CALL, AND COURAGE

President **Shauna K. Hannan**
on the future of LSTC



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WHAT A RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT LOOKS LIKE

The faithful formation of the ELCA's next presiding bishop.





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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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PLANTING SEEDS OF ACCESS

BELoved COMMUNITY,
I begin this call as your president with deep gratitude for the trust you've placed in me, for the vibrant legacy of this institution, for the faithful leadership of past presidents, and for the enduring promise that LSTC carries forward: to form leaders for the church and the world, leaders who are deeply committed to the good news and ways of Jesus Christ.

LSTC stands out for its audacious commitment to being the church in a way that pays careful attention to the world God so dearly loves. This world, a world of both beauty and brokenness, is difficult to bear for so many. And yet, it is into this very world that we are called to speak, to act, and to embody the gospel.

In this time of so much uncertainty, I've been thinking about the 16th-century reformers who laid the groundwork for the church's future—work that would evolve over decades and even centuries. Among the many profound ideas they championed in their own uncertain times, one stands out to me now: access.

- Access to the divine without needing an intermediary.
- Access to Scripture through translating the Bible into the language of the people.
- Access to both elements—bread and wine—at the Lord's Supper at a time when the wine was often reserved for the clergy.
- Access to theological education. One might think of the Luther's Small Catechism as the first lay school of theology "textbook" since it was written specifically for families.

We continue this reforming spirit at LSTC. We want anyone who has a desire for theological education (whether that be one class, a certificate, or a degree) to have access to it.

It is a joy to witness the ways our church is living more fully into the vision of the priesthood of all believers. We are seeing lay ministry leaders emerge all around us and they are asking to be equipped and empowered in their callings. LSTC is a resource for such equipping and empowering. Our newly launched Project Starling supports new and emerging leaders whose voices and presence are essential for the church to be whole. Among the many wonderful stories in this issue is an article I encourage you to read: "Stepping into the Call: How LSTC's SAM Program Equips New Leaders for the Church."

Even as we expand pathways to theological education, we remain firmly committed to our diverse degree offerings. This issue's article, "Ten Bishops, One Seminary: LSTC Alumni Leading a Changing Church," highlights the impact this breadth of degrees has and is making.

As we navigate unfamiliar paths, we do so with hope and confidence, trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us into a future marked by abundance and faithful impact. It is said that when asked what he would you do if the world were to end tomorrow, Luther noted, "I'd plant a tree." I join Luther in his hopeful defiance.

We are planting here at LSTC. The harvest is for you. 🌱



Shauna K. Hannan
LSTC President



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CALLING AS COVENANT

How solo backpacking over 3,000 miles alongside a seminary career aided in one student's discernment.

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PROMISE, CALL, AND COURAGE

President Shauna K. Hannan on the future of LSTC

By Rhiannon Koehler

Rev. Dr. Shauna K. Hannan reflects on the theme “A Promise Fulfilled,” by centering God’s faithfulness. “For me, ‘a promise fulfilled’ immediately points me to God as the one who fulfills promises,” she says, “Our God has called us into this endeavor called theological education and says, ‘Look, you’re not on your own. I’m with you.’”

The phrase is less a slogan than it is a map: God’s nearness, a community’s work, and a future that asks us to be resilient, adaptable, and expansive. President Hannan is candid about how calls arrive. “I have had experiences in my life of calls to new things coming from outside of myself,” she says, describing the nudge that led her from a beloved faculty post into this role. “This, indeed, was another one of those external nudges... it felt like a call. Sometimes,

you can get called from a call,” she says, referencing her prior role teaching preaching in Berkeley, California. When the conversations with the search committee for the presidency at LSTC made it clear “that something exciting was happening [here],” she knew she wanted to face the opportunities and challenges that come with a new position. “I wake up every morning, just really eager for the day,” she says of the early days of her new position. “And that feels just right.”

That eagerness carries an implicit charge. To talk about promise at LSTC is to talk about context, a word that threads through President Hannan’s sense of leadership and community. “We talk about the internal and the external call,” she notes. The internal summons is real. So is the church’s call, the city’s call, the world’s call—each is a context that reshapes how a seminary listens and leads.

LEADERSHIP, COMMUNITY, AND ‘ONE LSTC’

For Dr. Hannan, leadership is deeply entwined with challenges felt by so many seminaries these days. “There are multiple leadership styles, and I don’t think one leadership style aligns with one person throughout their whole lives,” President Hannan says. “We’re adaptable people, and we adapt to a context. Some situations call for a kind of transformational leadership style. I don’t think I was called to LSTC to maintain the status quo. No seminary can afford that right now, including LSTC.” Transformation, though, is not a solo sport. “We have to do this together. It’s a collective thing. It’s a collaborative thing. We need a collective buy in to make a difference. We need a team.”

That team flourishes when people work “out of



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I WANT US TO BE ABLE TO BE RESPONSIVE TO GOD'S GUIDANCE [AND] THE CHURCH'S NEEDS SO THAT IT CAN BEST RESPOND TO THE WORLD'S NEEDS.

LSTC PRESIDENT REV. DR. SHAUNA K. HANNAN

their strengths,” she says—strengths that can emerge in real time as responsibility grows and “we rise to the occasion.” The operative posture: nimble, honest, willing to pivot. “Yes, I know these are buzz words. But we have to remain nimble. A leader sets a vision collaboratively, but then has a process for proceeding, and always with the possibility that we’ll need to pivot again. I want us to be able to be responsive to God’s guidance



WE WANT TO EMPOWER PEOPLE WHOSE VOICES HAVE NOT ALWAYS BEEN HEARD. I FULLY EXPECT WE WILL BE DELIGHTFULLY SURPRISED AS A CHURCH WHEN WE BROADEN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHO IS A THEOLOGICAL EDUCATOR.

LSTC PRESIDENT SHAUNA K. HANNAN

[and] the church’s needs so that it can best respond to the world’s needs.”

From that posture comes a unifying frame with which to view the future, and a new way in which to work: One LSTC: Many Pathways. “People have different needs. We can do more than one thing,” she says. “This is one LSTC with multiple pathways to theological education.” For Dr. Hannan, the call of One LSTC means encouraging people to play to their strengths, asking people to adapt to a rapidly changing church and world, and encouraging all to honor the strength and power of community.

Community, in this telling, isn’t delivered from the top; it’s built by everyone. “It’ll take everyone. If people in our community want to strengthen the community, they have to be part of the process,” she says. “It’s not just one person who can make this happen.”

That insistence on shared work connects directly to considerations regarding access: questions of who can move from one location to another, how they learn, what is centered. “I think the word access is really key. Access for all,” President Hannan says. “We want people to be able to reach us. Sometimes that means going to them. Access is a very important theological theme. We know that Luther had a lot of anxiety about how to access God. But he discovered that isn’t the question. No, God already accesses us.” It is in these moments that we commit to providing access to all—whether through new learning paradigms like Project Starling or new ways of engaging potential learners—that we must also recommit to our faith and our values, even when faced with challenges to ideas we’ve previously held.

“Learning can be scary because there’s inevitably some kind of unlearning that happens first,” President Hannan says. “We don’t take a class just to get all that we know repeated. There’s a bit of an unknown—it’s risky. Learning is risky.” That risk is part of why she keeps returning to perspective—whose lens, whose life, whose story—as she considers the work of LSTC in imagining bold new futures. “The way we do things in ten years will probably not be the way we do them now,” she says. “And that’s okay. We just need to remember that.”

A PUBLIC, EXPANSIVE FUTURE

Ask President Hannan about LSTC’s role beyond campus and she casts the horizon wide. “What role will LSTC play in the world? And why not think big?” she asks, noting deep global ties already present in faculty call stories and international students. For Dr. Hannan, LSTC’s reputation in the world means that the institution carries a heavy mantle. After all, being known as a public-church seminary could, in the wrong hands, breed complacency. “There’s a potential danger in that. We constantly need to ask, are we actually living out being a public church seminary?”

Part of the answer is leaning into expansiveness. That includes reimagining how we offer seminary education, who gets invited to have a seat at the table, who teaches, who is heard. “LSTC has been and will continue to be a place that equips people to equip others. We want to empower people whose voices have not always been heard. I fully expect we will be delightfully surprised as a church when we broaden our understanding of who is a theological educator.”

The daily fuel for a future marked by inclusion, intersectionality, justice, and diversity is close at hand, and it lives in the lives of the students who come to LSTC for theological formation. “I’m most inspired by students who’ve maybe taken a risk to leave whatever job they were hoping to have, whatever career they were hoping to have,” she says. For international students whose families bless their call from afar, the courage is communal. “I’m so inspired by that. [These students] could have done many other things in this world, and yet here they are.” Of course, the

goal is for students to become alumni—to get out into the world God loves so dearly with the liberating message and work of Jesus. She wants alumni to know how proud we are of them. “We at LSTC want you, alums, to be proud of being an alum of LSTC. We want to connect with you, we want to hear from you, we want to support you in your ministries. We look forward to hearing how we can support you.”

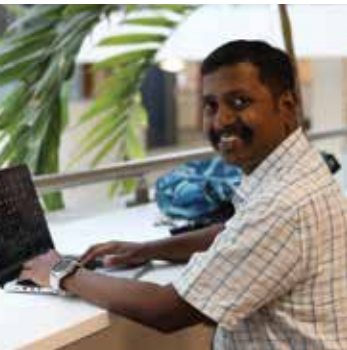
Despite the energy, call, and purpose that President Hannan brings to her role, she understands that this is a moment that for many is one of anxieties, of fears for the future, of uncertainty in how we proceed to both honor the practical needs of the institution and the values to which we remain deeply committed. In this moment, what brings hope? For President Hannan, it is promise made practical: pathways, programs, and people aligned around a Christ-centered mission. She points to Project Starling “as a foundation for developing multiple pathways to theological education.” LSTC recommit to traditional degree seekers even as we expand access to all that we have to offer. The refrain holds: One LSTC: Many Pathways. All of it in service to the church and world we are called to love.

The final word returns to where she began: in recognizing God’s ever-faithful partnership as we respond to a changing world. “Change is both challenge and opportunity. Our church has always been reforming and that is something worth embracing.” The promise of Jesus for new life is alive and well, and the community that is LSTC is ready to walk boldly with that promise into a hopeful future. 🌱

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STEPPING INTO

How LSTC's SAM program equips new leaders for the church

By Rhiannon Koehler

On a windswept Sunday morning in rural Wisconsin, a small Lutheran congregation gathers in its century-old sanctuary. Their pastor retired last year, and the search for a successor has stretched on for months. Yet worship continues, led faithfully by someone who, a year ago, never imagined standing behind the pulpit.

This is the promise of Synod Authorized Ministry (SAM). Rooted in the needs of local congregations and made possible by new educational pathways at the LSTC, SAM opens the door for lay leaders to step into Word and Sacrament Ministry in places where geography, finances, or other realities make a full-time pastoral calling nearly impossible.

“Synod Authorized Ministry is authorized by the ELCA churchwide constitution for any synod and bishop to implement, and it requires three things,” President and Professor *emeritus* James Nieman explains. “First, there has to be a situation of need—usually a ministry site where regular pastoral leadership is unavailable or unaffordable.

Second, the bishop must specifically authorize someone to serve in that place and time. And third, there are conditions: training, supervision, a clearly defined setting and annual review.”

The result is ministry that is both local and accountable, with SAM candidates trained and supported for the unique realities they'll encounter. And LSTC's new SAM program, launched through Project Starling in partnership with several synods, offers a distinctive approach to this preparation.

MEETING LEADERS WHERE THEY ARE

When synods began asking for stronger educational resources for SAM candidates, LSTC stepped in to help.

“Synods own the SAM process,” Nieman says. “They decide who serves, where, and for how long. Our role is to provide quality theological education—resources shaped by strong pedagogy, scholarship, and engagement with real-world ministry needs.”

The program draws on materials already developed for the TEEM program at LSTC through Project Starling's asynchronous learning platform. Instead

of relying on the familiar model of pulling students away from home and work to gather in classrooms, LSTC designed SAM to be fully online and asynchronous. That choice, Nieman notes, was deliberate.

“We meet learners where they are, with what they know, in the time and resources they have available,” he shared. “Many of them have full-time jobs, families, congregational responsibilities. We had to ask ourselves, ‘How do we make this learning fit alongside already crowded lives?’”

For congregations, this flexibility matters, too. Leaders can grow in knowledge while already serving their communities, bringing new skills into the pulpit, the classroom, and the fellowship hall week by week.

Sister Noreen Stevens, a deacon in the ELCA who was rostered in 1987, a year after she graduated with her MA from LSTC, facilitates the SAM program in the Northern Great Lakes Synod. She says that for their synod, the program's value lies not only in preparing potential SAM leaders, but also in equipping laypeople for ministry in all its forms.



Find out more about the SAM program here: <https://lstc.edu/academics/degrees/sam/>

THE CALL

“We’ve been clear from the beginning,” she explains, “that while this training may lead some into SAM roles, others will take what they learn back to their congregations, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Either way, we are equipping the saints for the work of ministry—and that’s the heart of our mission.”

Leaders can grow in knowledge while already serving their communities, bringing new skills into the pulpit, the classroom, and the fellowship hall week by week.

Margaret Hoversten, who facilitates SAM cohorts in the La Crosse Area Synod, sees this transformation firsthand. “I hope participants grow in confidence in their abilities and unique gifts to walk with others in faith,” she says. “And I hope they gain clarity about the role they’re called to take—whether as a SAM or as a deeply engaged lay leader.”

That mission begins with relationships. Stevens describes starting each cohort with an overnight retreat, where participants share their stories and hopes before gathering monthly online. These sessions check in on coursework, but they also create space for

discernment and mutual support.

“It’s about meeting the person where they’re at,” she says. “That’s where growth happens—when people are invited to bring their whole selves into the process.”

Both Nieman and Stevens point out that facilitators play a central role in shaping that environment. LSTC provides high-quality materials and pedagogical support, but it is the facilitators who adapt those resources to local realities, bringing in guest leaders, connecting the learning to congregational contexts, and ensuring students feel accompanied.

“We want participants to experience ministry as something shared,” Stevens said. “From the beginning, they see that leadership in the church happens through partnership—between synod and seminary, between facilitators and students, between congregations and the wider church.”

A FUTURE OF POSSIBILITY

While the current program focuses on preparing SAM leaders, Nieman envisions a future where these resources support lifelong learning for the whole church. Some synods may see SAM as a

first step, with candidates moving from SAM into further theological study. Others will use the program as a permanent solution for congregations where calling a full-time pastor simply isn’t realistic. Either way, the platform creates what Nieman calls “a long educational runway,” with potential for new modules on leadership, stewardship, conflict resolution, and more.

Stevens sees that potential in the lives of the participants themselves. As they deepen their theological understanding and discernment, she says, they begin to carry a renewed energy back into their communities.

“When people grow in faith and confidence,” she reflects, “they bring that hope and love into congregations that need it. It builds up the body of Christ in a world that desperately needs healing.”

Donor support will be crucial to keep production quality high and content accessible. Nieman hopes to see not only strong congregational leaders emerge from the program, but also moments when theological ideas connect with lived experience in ways that transform ministry on the

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PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR
EMERITUS JAMES NIEMAN

ground.

Back in that small Wisconsin church, the congregation finishes singing the final hymn. Their new leader, once unsure about stepping into this call, offers the blessing with growing confidence. It’s a simple moment—but for the people gathered there, it’s the start of something lasting. 🌱

LSTC thanks the Tietjen Family Foundation for underwriting the piloting of the SAM Development Training Program and supporting the formation of 40 SAMs.

OPENING THE DIGITAL DOORS

How LSTC and the ELCA Innovation Lab are reimagining theological education, together

By Mercedes Kane

It's 8:00 p.m. on a Thursday. After a long day of meetings and family responsibilities, the executive director of a nonprofit organization opens her laptop. As the screen light fills her office, she feels refreshed; a renewed sense of excitement logging into Project Starling for an evening of theological exploration.

This experience will soon be available to lifelong learners everywhere, thanks to a research collaboration between LSTC and the ELCA Innovation Lab. The two teams have come together in a pathbreaking partnership to reimagine theological education through asynchronous online learning.

Project Starling is a first-of-its-kind online learning

platform, developed by LSTC and launched in the summer of 2025. Offering a stackable pathway with a wide variety of courses including certification programs, workshops, and training opportunities, the goal, purpose, and mission of Project Starling is to make theological education accessible to everyone.

Lifelong learners, pastors-in-training, church leaders, retirees, and others can work towards continued education or candidacy programs like TEEM, Synod Authorized Ministers (SAMs), and MDiv when and how it fits into their lives and schedules.

"The church understands that the way it formed leaders in the past is no longer sustainable," said Keisha Dyson, LSTC's Vice President

for Enterprise Innovation. "At LSTC, we're expanding our digital reach and offering new pathways for leadership formation. Project Starling is that strategy in action: the culmination of years of planning."

The seminary was committed to making Project Starling accessible, user-friendly, and intuitive for students of all ages, geographies, and experience levels. To achieve this goal, the developers knew the courses need to be tested by real people, in real time—and with a team whose members have real-world experience examining innovation in action.

Enter the ELCA Innovation Lab at Churchwide, focused on finding the best solutions through experimentation, observation, and

understanding. When Dyson reached out to the Innovation Lab, the team at the Lab knew Project Starling was the right project with the right partners at the right time.

"This research project is the first time that we're working directly with a seminary, so it's kind of a pilot in itself," said Emilie Moravec, Innovation Partner, Organizational Innovation at Innovation Lab. "The more we can work with every expression of the ELCA, the better and more innovative we're all going to be."

Rahel Mwitula Williams, Interim Executive Director of Innovation, felt a personal calling to the project.

"TEEM education has played a major role in my spiritual growth," Mwitula Williams shared. "When





this opportunity to help strengthen and serve leadership development [came to the Lab], I knew it could be a meaningful and powerful way to honor my own journey, as well as a core component of Innovation’s work.”

The user study will assess Project Starling’s asynchronous courses by collecting and analyzing input from TEEM learners, SAMs, and those seeking professional development in theological education and church leadership. Across four waves of the process—before, during, and after learning, as well as additional follow up—the lab will evaluate content and overall user experience with the goal of improving course delivery and in-platform engagement.

“The surveys provide us with important information, but they can’t always give us the why behind things,” Moravec said. “We might see that a large number of students say time constraints are hard, but in an interview, we can ask about their day-to-day lives and how the courses fit into their schedules.”

“Once we hear those qualitative stories, we can unpack the why a little bit better, which can help inform future iterations of classes and how information is delivered.”

Seventy-five unique learners will take part in the yearlong study. With the first wave currently underway, the teams are already uncovering a series of unexpected findings.

“I was both surprised and encouraged by the diversity

of learners taking part in Project Starling,” Mwitula Williams shared. “There are ordained pastors who want a refresher, others who are using it as part of their discernment before making the decision to go to seminary, and a good number of younger adults interested in starting the candidacy process early.”

And while the team has found that over 40% of participants are interested in the TEEM program, many of them were unsure how to qualify for it.

“We’ve already started to uncover that there may be processes within our ELCA system that are barriers to these learners,” Moravec explained. “This is the first time I’ve been part of a research project that has

taught the team so much so early in the process; we’re not even through our first full round of user interviews.”

The initial findings and ongoing research offer opportunities to improve Project Starling—but the impact of the partnership has the potential to extend far beyond LSTC.

“Leadership development is the heart of Innovation’s work, and this partnership is an experiment in bold collaboration,” Mwitula Williams said. “There is an opportunity here for the three expressions of the church to come together and really change the direction of continuing education.”

Dyson agrees. “This partnership and study are not just changing the way we think about curriculum development,” Dyson said. “We are learning how to relate to one another in the absence of a governance structure and discovering new pathways for ministry formation together.” As Project Starling evolves, LSTC and the ELCA Innovation Lab are shaping the future of theological education: one learner, one course, and one digital door at a time. 🌱



To learn more about Project Starling, visit starling.lstc.edu.

FAITH FORMATION MEETS FLEXIBILITY

In her sixties, a former tech professional finds a new calling — and a new kind of seminary

When Pamela Blythe clicked “enroll” on an online theology module earlier this summer, she wasn’t just signing up for a course. She was, in her words, “cracking open a door that had been closed for decades.”

Blythe spent her early career as a teacher and then moved into the corporate world, mastering project management systems and online learning platforms at companies like Qualcomm. But behind her steady professional climb, a quieter longing had lingered — one that began in her teens when she first felt a tug toward ministry in a small Baptist church in California.

“In those days,” she recalled, “a woman who sensed a ministerial calling either became a missionary, a pastor’s wife, or settled for

something else.”

“For me, teaching was a really good ‘something else’ — until it wasn’t.”

After decades designing training programs and managing technology teams, Blythe retired and moved with her spouse to El Dorado Hills, California. Her church, St. Stephen’s Lutheran Church, was struggling to find supply pastors. “Watching our council president scramble each week made me wonder,” she said. “Was there a way for people like me — older, experienced, ready — to

serve without going back to seminary full-time?”

That question led her to Project Starling, a new digital learning platform created by the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago to expand access to theological education. Starling’s short, asynchronous modules are designed for learners who can’t easily uproot their lives for residential study — bi-vocational ministers, retirees, or second-career seekers like Blythe.

She discovered the program through another second-career pastor, the

Rev. Dianne Wendt, and a conversation with synod staff who mentioned that the Southwestern California Synod was exploring a Synod Authorized Ministry (SAM) pathway. When Blythe heard that Starling’s pilot courses were online, flexible, and designed for self-paced learners, she was intrigued.

“I’m very comfortable with online learning,” she said. “I used to design courses myself. Starling removes the barrier of time and space — and for someone in their sixties, that’s no small gift.”

Still, she knew she was stepping into something untested. Starling’s early modules were in pilot phase, and participants were encouraged to give feedback. Blythe quickly found herself wearing two hats — that of student and system-tester.

“There are glitches and hiccups in user testing, but I



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PAMELA BLYTHE, PROJECT STARLING STUDENT



get to use my background as a designer and administrator to help improve the experience for future learners. It feels collaborative — like we're building this together.”

What she didn't expect was how deeply the coursework would reach into her sense of self. A module in the Spiritual Formations resource on Spiritual Pathways stopped her short.

“It explored the four pathways — Mind, Heart, Mysticism, and Activism,” she said. “I realized mysticism isn't the sum total of spirituality. Understanding that Mind and Activism are also spiritual helped me stop worrying that I wasn't ‘spiritual enough.’ It was liberating.”

The journey hasn't been without its challenges. The

self-paced model requires discipline, and the solitude of online learning sometimes weighs on her.

“The total absence of human interaction is harder than you think,” she admitted. “If you're extroverted, you'll miss that energy.”

Still, she finds grace in the rhythm: the freedom to pause when life intervenes, the permission to move at her own pace, and the invitation to reflect rather than memorize.

For Blythe, Project Starling represents something larger than a

new educational venture — it's a bridge between the traditional seminary and a digital future where faith formation meets flexibility.

“Some of these modules have challenged my assumptions,” she said. “They've made me realize that ministry may demand more than I anticipated. But so far, that hasn't scared me off.”

Asked what she'd tell others considering Starling, Blythe offered the same grounded advice that once guided her in tech:

“Be open. Be curious. Manage your time. And enjoy the journey.” 🌸



President Shauna Hannan and Assistant Professor of New Testament Dr. Karri Alldredge at the 2025 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.



Dr. Mark Swanson, Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations and Auxiliary Faculty member Rosanne Swanson pictured with graduates at the 165th Commencement Ceremony.



Student Venesia Hutabarat solos at the 35th Annual Gospel Scholarship Concert.



ELCA Bishops and others at the installation of Bishop Curry at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN. Left to right: Rev. Pete Warmanen, Bishop Pedro Suárez, Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni, Bishop Tracey Breashears Schultz, Rev. Sarah Bunge, Rev. Dr. Shauna Hannan, Bishop Paul Erickson, Rev. Dr. Barbara Rossing, Bishop Stacie Fidler, Bishop Phil Hirsch, Bishop Jen Rude, and Rev. Dr. Carrie Lewis La Plante.



Rev. Dr. Rafael Malpica Padilla presenting at the 2025 Scherer Lecture.



President Shauna Hannan reading scripture at Opening Convocation



LSTC's October Artist-in-Residence, Casey VanderStel, pictured with artwork in LSTC's chapel.



Rev. Dr. Munther Issac at a public lecture held at LSTC on his latest work, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza*.



From left to right: Director of IT Charles Sansone, Director of Advancement Services Jen Stone, Vice President for Finance and Operations Richard Vivian, Registrar Bradley Arnette Erz and Interim Director of Admissions and Advisor for Enrollment Strategies Cindy Sisson talk to the larger group at LSTC's all-staff meeting on Monday, September 22, 2025.



WHAT A RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT LOOKS LIKE

The faithful formation of the ELCA's next presiding bishop

By **Rhiannon Koehler**

On the night he was elected Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Bishop Yehiel Curry, then serving as bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, limped to the podium (golf mishap, he confessed) and did what he has always done: he started with family, then he turned to formation.

"I'm what a return on your investment looks like," he told the assembly, his voice equal parts joy and accountability. The line landed because it was true: true of the congregations and communities that raised him; true of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod that recognized and nurtured his gifts; and true of LSTC,

the seminary that met him exactly where he stood—and then taught him to lead beyond it.

When the applause fades and the headlines tally their numbers, our story slips past the dais and into the rooms where a vocation was made: Tuesday-night classrooms that spilled into Wednesday pulpits, chapel light that taught another language of prayer, conversations that widened his field of vision.

At LSTC, ministry was rooted in calling and community, in neighbors and relationships. Here, theology learned to walk the city, to notice power and pain, and to imagine a world of possibility and promise. If you want a glimpse of the ELCA's future, begin where this bishop's roots ran deep:



Yehiel Curry, center, was installed as presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at a service on Oct. 4. Former presiding bishop Elizabeth Eaton participated in the service.

inside the formation that taught him how to imagine what has never been and to bring others with him on the journey ahead.

A JOURNEY TO A SEMINARY HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Curry's LSTC story begins long before he considered course numbers or syllabi on campus. He grew up in Woodlawn, on 61st and Woodlawn, walking past the seminary's former building at 55th and University without ever quite seeing it.

"I walked past that building throughout childhood and never knew it was there," he recalls. Weekend treats meant Hyde Park ice cream. Summers meant caddying at Jackson Park Golf Course, saving enough for a plate at Ribs 'n' Bibs. The neighborhood imprinted him; the seminary, as yet unseen, stood inside that imprint.

When he eventually crossed the threshold as a student, he brought the neighborhood with him, literally. "When I was taking classes, I used to pick up my children from the local grammar school," he says. "They would sit on The Shelf and do their homework. I'd check in on them during breaks."

It wasn't just that LSTC welcomed a working father with a full ministry plate; it was that the seminary became the family's third space: a place where vocation, parenting, neighborhood, and study could comfortably coningle.

Even earlier, Shekinah Chapel, the synod authorized worshiping community that would become the congregation Bishop Curry later pastored, was using LSTC classrooms for Bible study.

"My first time in class,

I remember my thought was, I've been in this class before," he says. For Bishop Curry, seminary was déjà vu and ministry was continuity. Indeed, formation was never separate from the neighborhood; it was the neighborhood's classroom.

THE CALL THAT INTERRUPTED A CAREER AND REWROTE A LIFE

Before seminary, Curry was on a different path: teaching, social work, then sales. In fact, before starting at LSTC, he had taken the entrepreneurial leap to open his own office. The financial services trajectory was both promising and costly. Then Shekinah and synod leaders asked him to consider becoming a lay mission developer. Saying yes, he discovered, wasn't just about a role. It required formation.

"What drew me to theological education might be seen as a burden," he explains with candor. "I thought I was just gonna be the next big thing in sales. After about a semester at LSTC, I realized that I couldn't do both, and I felt more and more drawn to the ministry than I did financial services."

The practical tensions were real: income, family, responsibility. "My wife had always been the breadwinner," he says. He worried about repeating a familiar pattern where he would return to school and she would shoulder more of the load. But there was also the urgency of community.

"In order for Shekinah Chapel... to continue on its journey, they needed a person to lead them. And I needed to complete the requirements for the [TEEM] program in order for that progress to continue." He made a bargain with himself – finish the courses so the church could continue to exist.

In the process, he discovered the shape of his ministry, and LSTC discovered the kind of leader its mission is designed to form: a builder in the world, not just a thinker about the world.

TEEM AT LSTC: LEARN ON TUESDAY, LEAD ON WEDNESDAY

The TEEM program at LSTC was designed so that faith leaders like Bishop Curry could attend to their call while living their lives. It's an ELCA leadership formation process designed for people serving in emerging ministry sites who have been identified as candidates for further study by their synod bishop. Bishop Curry was one of those individuals. A primary reason Bishop Curry has been such a powerful advocate for the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) pathway is that he was able to use what he learned immediately to advance his call.

"What I appreciated most about the classroom was that I could learn something on a Tuesday and try it out at the church on Wednesday," he says. "I was hungry for whatever the seminary could give me because it's almost like I had my own sandbox."

That sandbox wasn't just homiletical. It was organizational. TEEM formation pressed him into leadership development. He had to build capacity at Shekinah even as he studied.

The classroom catalyzed ministry structures. Bishop Curry took advantage of everything the program had to offer, notably launching a lay preaching cadre at Shekinah. "One of the leaders... is a guy by the name of Jason Williams who happened to go through the [TEEM] program and is now the pastor of Shekinah Chapel."

This is the LSTC pattern

writ-small and then large: formation that multiplies leaders.

And it wasn't just one class at TEEM that set the pathway; it was the community of scholars, advocates and faith leaders that provided the opportunity for Bishop Curry to advance his call holistically.

Dr. Linda Thomas's constructive theology course introduced him to "intersectionality," a word that "was a mind shift and allowed me to see ministry in a way that I realized I had blinders on."

Professor David Rhodes (in a Gospel of Mark course) asked students to memorize and deliver Scripture, unlocking Curry's oratorical gifts. Dr. Katie Billman's course on death and dying knit classroom to CPE nights on call at the University of Illinois at Chicago Hospital. These aren't discrete academic moments; they represent the ecology of LSTC, a faculty and curriculum that assumes ministry is public, contextual, and communal.

Indeed, even when the learning was hard, it was formative. Dr. Ralph Klein, Curry remembers, met him in the gap between what he sought ("a Bible college") and what he had found ("a school of theology"). Klein insisted he go to chapel "because I want you to be bilingual," Curry paraphrases, able to move between the worship life embodied in LSTC's chapel and the worship life he knew on the South Side. The point wasn't conformity; it was fluency. Public church leaders must speak more than one liturgical dialect, and Bishop Curry was going to master multiple.

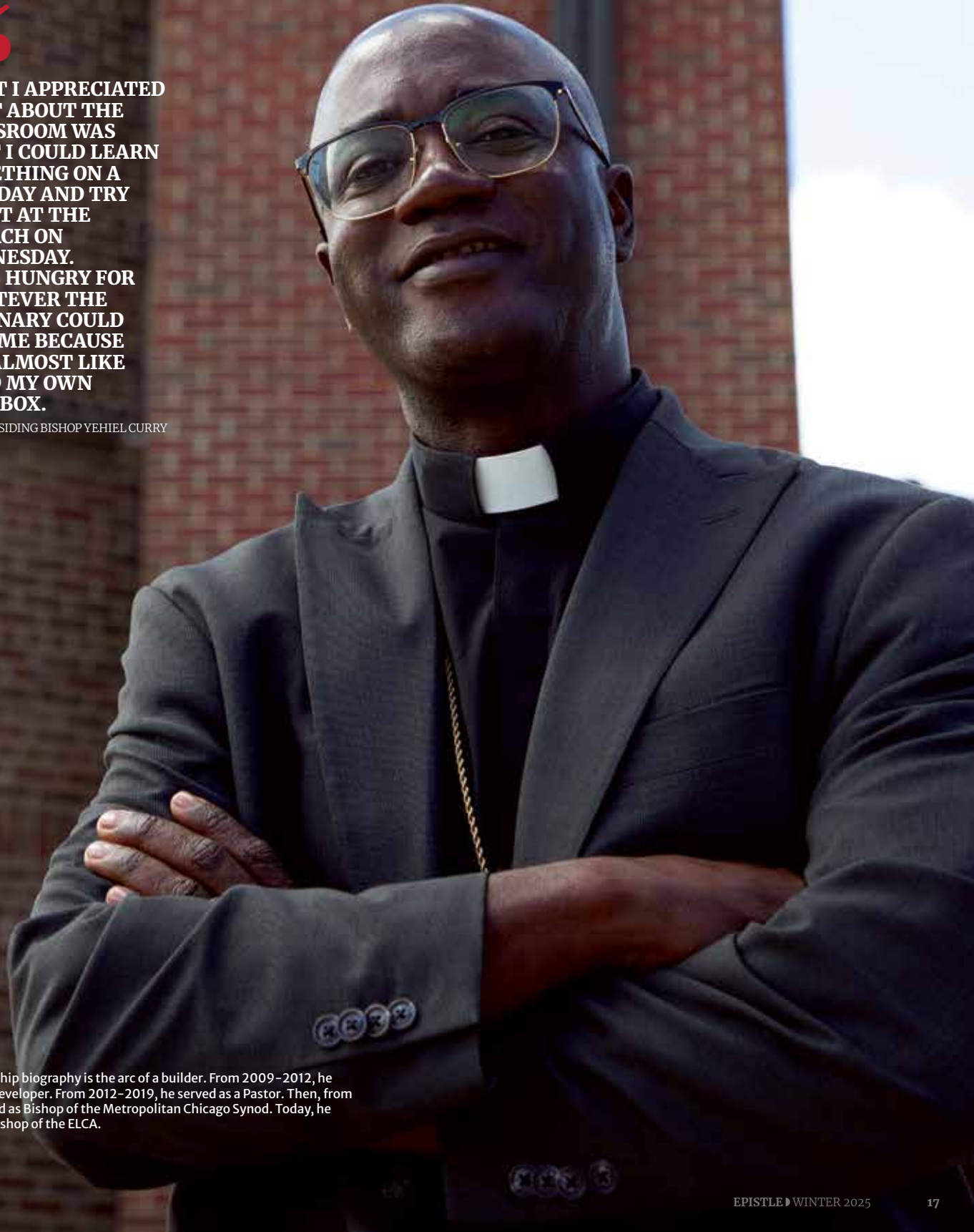
FROM ASTERISK TO ADVOCATE: RETURNING FOR THE MDIV

Early on, TEEM could, to some, feel like a two-



WHAT I APPRECIATED MOST ABOUT THE CLASSROOM WAS THAT I COULD LEARN SOMETHING ON A TUESDAY AND TRY IT OUT AT THE CHURCH ON WEDNESDAY. I WAS HUNGRY FOR WHATEVER THE SEMINARY COULD GIVE ME BECAUSE IT'S ALMOST LIKE I HAD MY OWN SANDBOX.

ELCA PRESIDING BISHOP YEHIEL CURRY



Yehiel Curry's leadership biography is the arc of a builder. From 2009–2012, he served as a Mission Developer. From 2012–2019, he served as a Pastor. Then, from 2019–2025, he served as Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. Today, he serves as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA.

tiered system in the wider church. One member of the committee supporting Bishop Curry's pathway, the panel that had to sign off on his approval for finishing TEEM, even wrote on an approval document that they hoped he would return to LSTC for an MDiv. The note may have been well-intended, but it was also wounding.

"I didn't want to be known as the person with the asterisk," he says. He made himself a promise: if he ever had a role with influence, he would "erase that asterisk." He would lift up TEEM as a viable, rigorous pathway: not lesser than, just different.

While waiting for ordination in 2009, he began taking the courses he had missed, often at his own expense, two at a time, filling in gaps, connecting dots, and "falling in love with the process." Shekinah became an organized congregation in 2012; he completed the MDiv in 2013. The timeline matters because it showcases the both/and that LSTC refuses to relinquish: both immediate authorization for urgent ministry and long-arc formation; both contextual leadership and academic depth.

This is also where LSTC's institutional learning intersects with Curry's story. The seminary has reimaged its TEEM pathway in recent years: it is now integrated with asynchronous learning through Project Starling, precisely so committed leaders can be formed in place. When Bishop Curry says LSTC "said yes" to revisiting TEEM, he is affirming that the institution listened to the lived reality he embodied and then re-designed for impact.

BUILDERS BUILD: MISSION DEVELOPER, PASTOR, BISHOP

Curry's leadership biography is the arc of a builder. From 2009–2012 he served as a Mission Developer. From 2012–2019, he served as a Pastor. Then, from 2019–2025, he served as Bishop of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. Today, he serves as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. The titles changed; the verbs did not. He organizes, apprentices, develops, and then hands off.

The apprenticeship pattern he learned and refined: "I do; we do; you do; you teach," is not just staff coaching jargon for him; it's ecclesiology.

"I've always approached this as somebody who's leaving," he says. "If you always know you're leaving, the goal is always to make sure that information is passed on."

That sensibility is why he could say, even as a sitting bishop accepting the nomination for Presiding Bishop, "I won't end my career in a Bishop's office. I'm a builder...and I have to build it again."

It is also why his synod work focused so intently on creating multiple entry points for leaders, especially leaders with deep community roots and vocational commitments that do not fit a residential, full-time model. In Chicago, that included a bivocational approach and a six-year covenant for TEEM candidates serving congregations, made up of three years of supported study and service, followed by three years of committed leadership. It also included creative use of Synod Authorized Ministry (SAM) to sustain sacramental life as candidates progressed.

The results? "I could think of

four to five congregations that didn't have [any] leadership but now have had consistent leadership and they're doing really well," he says.

That is not a small thing in a church wrestling with pastoral shortages, changing demographics, and institutional fatigue. It is, in fact, what investment looks like.

A SEMINARY THAT LEARNS ALONGSIDE ITS LEADERS

One thread runs through Curry's story is that he never learned alone. LSTC's faculty challenged, encouraged, and stretched him; classmates became colleagues; his congregation learned alongside him. That last piece is crucial.

"I always wondered during that time, can the congregation learn what I'm learning right now?" he says. It was a question that leaders at LSTC considered with great hope and even greater clarity of purpose. Today, with Project Starling's asynchronous pathways and the seminary's renewed attention to lay formation, the answer is increasingly yes.

When he served on LSTC's Board of Directors, Curry pressed this vision. "There's a hunger here for some education," he told colleagues. "And I think the seminary is the best place for us to receive it."

He dreamed out loud about a teaching congregation where LSTC's preaching labs and curricular experiments could bless a neighborhood in real time. Imagine students preaching in a real sanctuary to a real community, where the feedback loop includes not only a rubric but the responses of people who will live with the sermon all week. Imagine Sunday school curriculum piloted by

families who will tell you the truth. Imagine stewardship campaigns designed with the community, not simply for it.

That is public church in action: not a slogan, but a commitment to showing up, learning with, and building capacity in communities rather than extracting from them.

Curry's leadership is deeply pastoral and unmistakably public. In January 2021, after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, he wrote with stark clarity about the racial double standards on display: "If it was us, we would've been shot."

It was not performative outrage; it was pastoral truth-telling grounded in lived experience and theological conviction. That voice was honed in classrooms where intersectionality reframed what counted as "theological," in chapels where multiple worship idioms taught bilingual fluency, in neighborhoods where the church's public witness is measured by the lives it accompanies.

This is a hallmark of LSTC's formation: we prepare leaders who can love their people and lead them into the world with eyes open. It is why Bishop Curry's preaching, board service, and synod leadership have continued to name white supremacy as sin while calling communities toward hope, relationship, and action. The pairing—truth and hope—echoes LSTC's values: justice rooted in Scripture, hospitality that crosses difference, and leadership formed for the sake of the world God loves.

WHY LSTC? BECAUSE PUBLIC PROBLEMS REQUIRE PUBLIC-CHURCH LEADERS

In this moment of historic celebration in which we

honor not only a remarkable LSTC graduate who cemented traditions with the courage that would make historian Eric Hobsbawm blush but also the election of the first African-American Presiding Bishop of the ELCA—a denomination that was found to be 93% white in a study done by the ELCA in 2024—it is fair to ask: what about LSTC made this story not



THIS IS A HALLMARK OF LSTC'S FORMATION: WE PREPARE LEADERS WHO CAN LOVE THEIR PEOPLE AND LEAD THEM INTO THE WORLD WITH EYES OPEN. IT IS WHY BISHOP CURRY'S PREACHING, BOARD SERVICE, AND SYNOD LEADERSHIP HAVE CONTINUED TO NAME WHITE SUPREMACY AS SIN WHILE CALLING COMMUNITIES TOWARD HOPE, RELATIONSHIP, AND ACTION.

only possible but, in a sense, inevitable? A few distinctives rise to the surface of Bishop Curry's journey.

First, LSTC was and remains committed to doubling down on contextual, flexible pathways: from a revitalized, credit-bearing TEEM to asynchronous and hybrid learning through Project Starling to opportunities for remote students to engage with residential students in traditional degree pathways, the institution understands that serious leaders live complicated lives. Curry's





Bishop Curry stands with his family at his installation on October 4, 2025.

children did homework in LSTC’s hallway while their dad did Greek paradigms; he left preaching lab and built a lay preaching lab at Shekinah. That bi-directional flow—classroom to congregation, congregation to classroom—is the seminary’s design principle, not a workaround.

Also, LSTC celebrated intersectionality in a way that was lived authentically by the wider community. “Intersectionality” wasn’t just vocabulary for Curry; it was conversion. LSTC’s faculty teach theology with a public lens: race, gender, economics, health, migration, because the gospel is already out there in the world’s fractures. Leaders formed this way can say, with credibility and courage, “If it was us, we would’ve been shot,” and then convene communities for healing and action.

As Bishop Curry indicated in his acceptance speech, LSTC understood then and understands now that the key is in multiplying leaders, not just credentialing them. From preaching labs that beget lay preaching cadres to board-level advocacy for lay education, LSTC’s question is never simply, “How do we train you?” It is also, “How does your formation multiply formation in your context?” That’s how a TEEM mission developer becomes a pastor who becomes a bishop who becomes a presiding bishop—and no one walks that path alone.

Finally, Curry’s vision of a teaching congregation is LSTC’s dream, too: seminary and church as co-laborers. The same posture animates the seminary’s developing work with SAM preparation and multiple pathways for authorization,

in collaboration with synods who know their contexts best.

When Bishop Curry says, “People will support what they help to create,” LSTC hears an affirmation of our commitment to reimagining a just and bold future. As Bishop Curry’s journey shows, leadership is out there in unexpected places. LSTC has long understood that it is more than worth the effort to meet people where they’re at in order to realize the formation that lives in their spirit.

Ask Curry about his most vivid LSTC memories and you’ll hear the geography again: Woodlawn and Hyde Park; St. Thomas across from the old seminary building; kids doing their homework on campus; nights on call at UIC Hospital; Bible studies that migrated from Shekinah to LSTC classrooms and back. The pattern was never cloistered study then

supervised ministry. It was study as ministry, ministry as study.

That is why his leadership voice rings with both reverence and realism. He honors the chapel and the community. He loves the liturgy he learned to speak fluently and the worship life that first gave him a voice. He can preach to a Churchwide Assembly and end with a plea to bring others along in the learning, because that is how he was formed.

It is tempting to treat an election as the exclamation point at the end of a sentence. In Curry’s case, the punctuation is different: more like a semi-colon. What follows are the apprentices who will lead, the congregations that will stabilize and flourish, the lay learners who will finally get the theological education they have been asking for, the multiple pathways that will hold people who have three jobs and a call to preach in holy sanctity.

Curry’s apprenticeship model, which he mentioned at Churchwide in 2025, “I do; we do; you do; you teach,” is also a curriculum. It is what LSTC’s cohorts do every day. We learn together in the hope that our learning widens the circle of leadership. It is how TEEM candidates become pastors who become mentors. It is how a preaching lab becomes a cadre. It is how a seminary becomes a public good, and how we meet the public church in times such as these.

And it is, finally, how a boy who once walked past a building he did not recognize could later stand in that same neighborhood: older, wiser, limping a little, grateful a lot, and tell a whole church what a return on their investment looks like. 🌱



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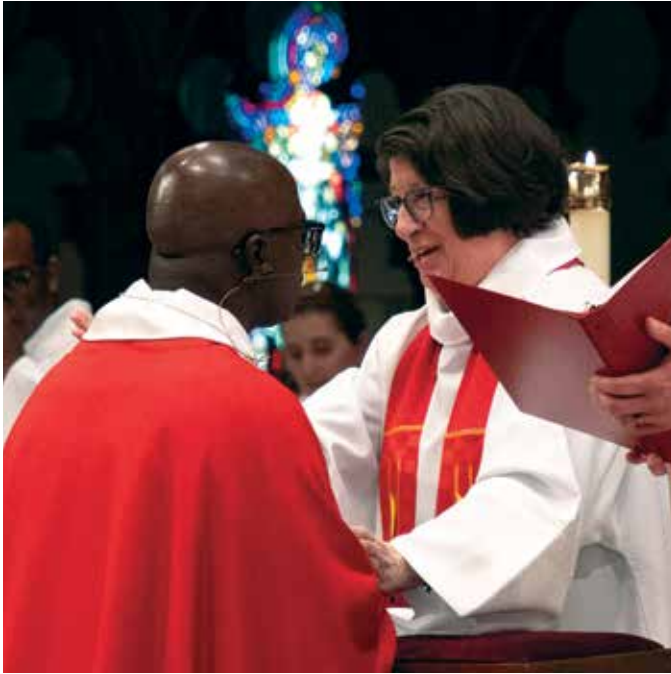
—Keisha Dyson, Vice President for Enterprise Innovation

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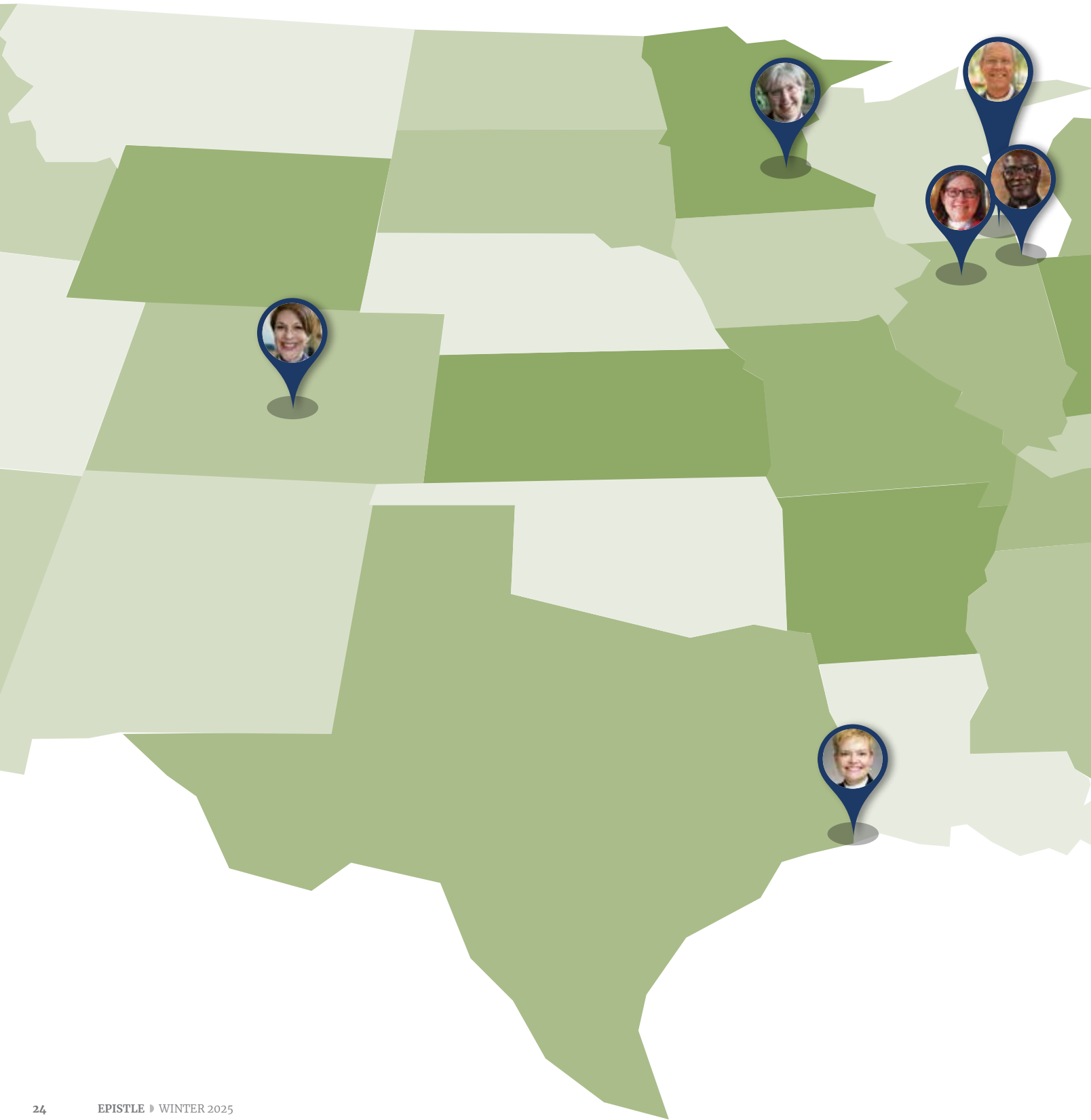


PRESIDING BISHOP'S INSTALLATION



PRESIDING BISHOP'S INSTALLATION





TEN BISHOPS, ONE SEMINARY



LSTC alumni are
leading a changing church

**“By Rhiannon Koehler
and Shemiah Curry**

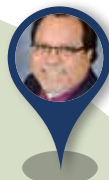
I wasn't raised in the church," recalls Bishop Tracey Breashears Schultz, DMin '14. "My faith came to me through my paternal grandmother. Whenever she would come and visit us, we would do things we didn't always do as a family, like pray before meals and go to church on Sunday. I really loved getting to be with my grandmother in church because of the way she sang,

and because of the way she was always ready to raise her hand when the pastor asked if anybody wanted to give a witness."

It was that grandmother who first asked a young Bishop Schultz if she wanted to give her life to Jesus. Bishop Schultz said yes. At the time, she didn't fully understand what it meant, but she knew it had something to do with the way her grandmother's eyes shone when she prayed; with the way faith carried her through the hardships of life.

Years later, that early spark of faith would be rekindled by an unlikely source.

Bishop Schultz' first husband died unexpectedly when she was only 25. The grief was devastating, and the theology she had grown up with offered little comfort. "I remember a pastor telling me that maybe Jesus calls some of us to suffer," she recalled. "But I





BISHOP TRACEY BREASHEARS SCHULTZ, DMIN '14

Gulf Coast Synod, Texas and Louisiana



BISHOP STACIE FIDLAR, MDiv '91

Northern Illinois Synod



BISHOP PHILIP HIRSCH, MDiv '90

Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod

couldn't imagine a God who would want me to feel the way I was feeling."

It was a Lutheran hospital chaplain who changed everything. He didn't preach at her. He didn't try to explain away the tragedy. He simply showed up—praying with her, sitting with her family in the silence of the hospital room.

That experience led her to a Lutheran congregation, then to LSTC, where she earned her Doctor of Ministry in Preaching. LSTC, she said, gave her the grounding in theology and the practical tools to lead with courage in times of uncertainty; skills she leans on now as a bishop in a rapidly changing church.

And she is not alone.

Today, ten LSTC alumni serve as bishops across the Evangelical

Lutheran Church in America, shaping the life of the church in urban and rural synods, in multilingual congregations, in interfaith spaces, and on the global stage. It is a watershed moment in LSTC's history—a visible sign of how the seminary's values of justice, inclusivity, and public engagement have formed leaders for a world in profound transition. This convergence of leadership is not just a point of pride for the seminary: it's LSTC's mission—to form visionary leaders capable of navigating a changing church and world with courage, compassion, and hope—in action.

From Houston to Minneapolis; Denver to Washington, D.C., they carry LSTC's values into congregations navigating cultural change,

demographic shifts, and the call to be a public church in a complex world.

While their paths differ—some were shaped by global mission work, others by community organizing, others by multilingual urban ministry—all attribute the formation and clarification of their theological depth, pastoral imagination, and commitment to justice to their experiences at LSTC, as well as their confidence and ability to lead a changing church during tumultuous times.

FORMATION FOR A CHANGING CHURCH

For Bishop Paul Erickson, MDiv '89, that meant four months in Cuernavaca, Mexico, living with a family whose lives were transformed by liberation theology. "I saw the power

that Bible studies had to transform people's lives," he said. "A man learned to read through those Bible studies. He stopped drinking, fixed up his home, provided for his family—all because he came to believe that God wanted a better life for him... I said, 'That's the movement I want to be a part of.'"

Others spoke of urban ministry and public church engagement as the formative center of their LSTC experience. Bishop Philip Hirsch, MDiv '90, studied in Zimbabwe and South Africa during the height of apartheid. "For the first time," he said, "I saw a church that preached the gospel of love and grace but also justice and human rights... I thought, 'If this is what the church can be about, then I'm in.'"

For Bishop Stacie Fidler, MDiv '91, formation came not only in classrooms but in the relationships and opportunities LSTC offered to lead, preach, and serve while still a student. "It was a place where I could develop my faith in a new way that enabled me to lead in faith," she said. "I learned



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BISHOP PHILIP HIRSCH, MDiv '90



**BISHOP PEDRO SUÁREZ,
MDIV '92**

Florida-Bahamas Synod



**BISHOP MELISSA LARSEN
STOLLER, MDIV '05**

Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod



**BISHOP MEGHAN JOHNSTON
AELABOUNI, MDIV '06**

Rocky Mountain Synod

to be in conversations across difference and to invite people to walk with me.”

Bishop Meghan Johnston Aelabouni, MDiv '06, whose ministry later took her to Palestine and Israel with ELCA Global Mission, felt LSTC's community of diversity and dialogue directly shaped her vocation. “I was enriched deeply by teachers, mentors, and classmates whose stories were different from mine,” she said. “They challenged my assumptions, helped me ask better questions, and made me a better pastor, a better neighbor, a better member of the body of Christ.”

In different ways, places, and forms, LSTC taught each of these bishops how to hold in balance their faith and the complexities of real life—grief and grace, justice and mercy, tradition and innovation—while leading communities through change.

**RESILIENT LEADERSHIP
DURING TIMES OF CRISIS**

Leadership in the church has never been easy, but today's challenges—declining membership in many



LSTC PREPARED ME FOR THIS MOMENT IN AMERICAN POLITICS...WE ARE NOT ENGAGED IN EFFORTS FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AND FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESSIBILITY FOR OPTICS. WE'RE DOING IT BECAUSE THAT IS WHO JESUS WAS AND IS; BECAUSE THIS IS HOW GOD INTENDS THE WORLD TO BE.

BISHOP MEGHAN JOHNSTON AELABOUNI, MDIV '06

congregations, political polarization, cultural change—require a depth of faith and resilience that goes beyond quick fixes.

For Bishop Schultz, resilience was forged in the crucible of personal grief long before she was elected to the episcopate. Losing her husband at 25 reshaped her faith—and later, her leadership. “I was drawn in by the worship and the liturgy and the preaching out grace...boy, did I ever need that at the time. It was a beautiful experience.”

Bishop Donald Kreiss, MDiv '92, DMin '07, now in his third term leading the Southeast Michigan Synod, recalled that when he was first elected in 2011, the synod had experienced years of turnover in the

bishop's office—multiple resignations, even a sudden death in office. “We'd gone through a bishop election every other year for eight years,” he said. Part of Bishop Kreiss' call was to help members of his synod breathe again, to remember that leadership can be steady and faithful, not just reactive.

Resilience, several bishops noted, also comes from global perspective. Bishop Hirsch said his year in apartheid-era South Africa changed forever how he saw the church's role in times of crisis. “I saw a church that was preaching the gospel of love and grace and acceptance and justice; the need to fight for human rights.” he said. It convinced him that the gospel was more

than words—it was also action in the world.

Others spoke of crises closer to home: hurricanes along the Gulf Coast, racial justice uprisings in Minneapolis, the disorientation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bishop Jen Nagel, Certificate of Studies '99, elected in the Minneapolis Area Synod in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, said the church had to confront its own complicity while offering hope, working to heal and nurture congregations while mobilizing them to tackle the hard, long work of systemic change.

Whether facing personal loss, public tragedy, or institutional upheaval, the bishops' time at LSTC taught



BISHOP JEN NAGEL,
CERTIFICATE OF STUDIES '99
Minneapolis Area Synod



PRESIDING BISHOP YEHIEL
CURRY, TEEM '09, MDIV '11
Presiding Bishop of the ELCA



BISHOP DONALD KREISS,
MDIV '92, DMIN '07
Southeast Michigan Synod



WE IN THE GOSPEL ARE CALLED TO LIVE OUT RECONCILIATION AND HEALING. THAT REQUIRES INTENTIONALITY ON EVERYONE'S PART, CONTINUALLY REMEMBERING HOW TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR, CONTINUALLY REMEMBERING THAT OUR NEIGHBOR IS NOT GOING TO THINK THE SAME WAY WE DO, AND THEY ARE STILL A BELOVED CHILD OF GOD.

BISHOP STACIE FIDLAR, MDIV '91

them to lead not from fear, but from faith—to tell the truth about the world’s pain while proclaiming God’s promises in the midst of it.

A COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE

The bishops spoke of the gospel as inseparable from justice—and of the many ways LSTC taught them to see faith and public life as deeply intertwined.

For Bishop Pedro Suárez, MDiv '92, this conviction grew out of his own story. Born in Venezuela, the son and grandson of pastors, he came to LSTC after first studying theology in South America. He sought a church where grace was real, where women could be ordained—where faith meant engaging with the world, not hiding from it. At LSTC, he found

that—and saw a church where justice and mercy walk hand in hand.

His vision for an open, ecumenical approach would carry him through years of bilingual, multicultural ministry across Illinois, Wisconsin, and Texas before he was elected bishop of the Florida-Bahamas Synod. Today, he leads a synod shaped by immigration, racial diversity, and interfaith partnerships—realities he says LSTC prepared him to embrace rather than fear.

Bishop Aelabouni, who served for five years in Palestine and Israel before her election to the Rocky Mountain Synod, said her time at LSTC taught her to lead with her values. “LSTC prepared

me for this moment in American politics...we are not engaged in efforts for racial justice and for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility for optics. We’re doing it because that is who Jesus was and is; because this is how God intends the world to be.”

In their positions, the ten bishops are committed to creating and leading communities that look more like the kingdom of God—multilingual, multiracial, and oriented toward the needs of the world.

COMMUNITY AND PASTORAL CARE

In the midst of their commitment to innovation, justice, and resilience, the bishops kept returning to something both older

and deeper: the pastoral heart of ministry. Leadership, they insisted, is not simply about managing change or solving problems. It is about accompaniment—walking with people through grief and joy, fear and hope, uncertainty and transformation.

“We in the gospel are called to live out reconciliation and healing,” said Bishop Fidler, noting the challenges in community cohesion that her Northern Illinois Synod faces daily. “That requires intentionality on everyone’s part, continually remembering how to love our neighbor, continually remembering that our neighbor is not going to think the same way we do, and they are still a beloved child of God.”

That pastoral dimension surfaced repeatedly in the bishops’ stories, even as they noted that LSTC’s institutional commitment to pastoral care shines through. As Bishop Schultz said, “I think one of the things LSTC values is meeting people where they are, building relationships, and getting the opportunity to have these deep conversations—then



BISHOP PAUL ERICKSON, MDIV '89

Greater Milwaukee Synod

accompanying people as they come to an understanding that the world is broken and God has something to say about that. I can be a witness for that.”

Bishop Melissa Larsen Stoller, MDiv '05, who first trained as a community organizer, said LSTC helped her see that leadership means both preserving tradition and embracing change. “If we can walk with people as they learn and grow and change their minds and see the world in new ways, then we will be a community of Christ that’s always seeking hope, faith, love, justice, understanding,” she said.

Others echoed that theme of accompaniment as leadership.

Bishop Erickson said his years of bilingual ministry in Milwaukee taught him that communities flourish when leaders listen before they speak. “One of the things I love about being bishop is the challenge to try to shift the culture of a whole ecology of systems. So, it’s not just a congregational culture that pastors and lay leaders work to shape, but a culture of cultures.”

That humility, he added, came directly from his time at LSTC, where professors insisted that theology must emerge from real people’s experiences—not just academic debate.

When Bishop Kreiss was elected, he noted, his synod had been through so much turnover, so much loss. What people needed first wasn’t a five-year strategic plan. They needed a leader who would listen, who would be with them, who would remind them that the church can be a community of trust. He reached back to his days at LSTC where he learned, in his words, “a lot about really careful, reflective listening,” in order to establish trust, to move forward despite uncertainty, to hear the pain in people’s stories and hold their hope for a better future.

Several bishops noted that this emphasis on presence and care did not make leadership easier. If anything, it often meant absorbing more of the community’s grief, anxiety, or conflict.

“This is the heart of pastoral ministry,” said Bishop Stoller. “We love people. And when we

love each other, when our congregations and parishioners know that we love them and they love us, then we can talk through the difficult things. Then we can move into ways of understanding conflict and places where we can move into justice.” This was the unifying hope that all of the bishops held for congregations in their synods.

The bishops said that what sustained them in this work was the same thing that had shaped them at LSTC: a community where theology, justice, and pastoral care were never separate things, but part of the same calling.

As Bishop Suárez noted, “LSTC helped me to balance tradition and innovation... it has been said that we’re living in a crisis where we don’t have new leaders, but almost everywhere I go I see young people wanting to come into ministry. And that fills me with hope.”

LEADING WITH COURAGE AND HOPE

When asked what it means that ten LSTC alumni now serve as bishops across the ELCA, the responses were less about personal achievement and more about a shared vocation for a changing church.

“I’m now preparing to

enter into a new role,” said Bishop Yehiel Curry, TEEM '09, MDiv '11, “And the first thing I want to do is ask, ‘How do I bring others along with me on this journey of learning?’ We as a Church want to be more young, more diverse, more connected, thriving.” This, he proclaims, as the new Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, is the moment for such change.

This moment, in the words of so many of the bishops we spoke with, is defined by both challenge and opportunity. Across the country, congregations are navigating declining membership, cultural polarization, and generational shifts in how people connect to faith. Yet again and again, the bishops insisted that the church’s future is not one of despair but of transformation—rooted in the same gospel that first called them to ministry.

“The church right now, as much or more than ever, needs to understand its voice as public church,” said Bishop Nagel. “And our instinct, because this time is just so terrifying, is to turn inward and hunker down. But this is the time that we’re called to be expansive; to look outward toward the need and the concern. I think that’s how Jesus would have us do it.” ✨



THIS IS THE HEART OF PASTORAL MINISTRY. WE LOVE PEOPLE. AND WHEN WE LOVE EACH OTHER, WHEN OUR CONGREGATIONS AND PARISHIONERS KNOW THAT WE LOVE THEM AND THEY LOVE US, THEN WE CAN TALK THROUGH THE DIFFICULT THINGS. THEN WE CAN MOVE INTO WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT AND PLACES WHERE WE CAN MOVE INTO JUSTICE.

BISHOP MELISSA LARSEN STOLLER, MDiv '05

HOW CCME PROMOTES INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT TO FOSTER UNDERSTANDING

By Alisha Green

For Sara Trumm, education and engagement go hand in hand. Trumm currently serves as Director of A Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice (CCME) at LSTC. Founded in 2006, CCME fosters and deepens relations between Christians and Muslims as a significant part of its broader mission to build bridges of mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among people of all faiths.

“To me, ‘engagement’ is the key word in our organization’s title,” Trumm says.

CCME hosts a wide range of activities throughout the year, reaching out to people of different faiths both online and in person and creating opportunities for them to get to know and learn from one another. From mosque visits and interreligious dialogues to an annual Giving Thanks Feast, Trumm has a front-row seat to the power and impact of interfaith experiences.

“Even going to a mosque and watching prayer can spark someone saying, ‘Wow, that commitment to praying five times a day is so amazing and beautiful,’” Trumm says.

To plan activities for the fall semester this year,

Trumm asked students what they wanted to learn, and what types of experiences they most wanted to have. They expressed particular interest in sitting down to talk with people from other faith traditions.

In accordance with that request, this fall CCME is offering many such engagement and learning opportunities. During the annual Kristallnacht Service of Remembrance in nearly November—led by a rabbi and cantor from a local synagogue, with members of the Jewish community in attendance—participants acknowledge Martin Luther’s “anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews,” as described in A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community. That declaration was adopted by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1994, and a revised version was adopted by the Church Council in 2021 as a reaffirmation.

“This is always a very powerful event and an important opportunity for us to evaluate our involvement or noninvolvement [in speaking out and standing up for marginalized people],” Trumm says.

Alongside that



TOP LEFT: Sara Trumm receives the Community Champion Award from the American Islamic College. TOP RIGHT: Group discussion at The Mecca Center at CCME’s annual Interfaith Alley Trolley Tour in 2023. MIDDLE ROW LEFT: CCME hosted a visit to the American Islamic College during the Fall 2024 new student orientation week. MIDDLE ROW RIGHT: Sara Trumm pictured with students at a mosque visit coordinated with the American Islamic College during new student orientation in 2023. BOTTOM LEFT: Tour-goers visit the Wat Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center during CCME’s annual Trolley Tour. BOTTOM RIGHT: Giving Thanks Feast 2015.

acknowledgement of the past, CCME is working to build a better future through a program on preaching Jesus with interfaith sensitivity, tailored primarily to the Jewish community. There are some texts pastors may be asked to preach on that can be hurtful to the Jewish community, Trumm notes, playing into stereotypes without even realizing it. The goal of the interfaith sensitivity program is to raise awareness about those issues while also highlighting texts that bring communities together through their shared histories and values.

The different types of

events and conversations CCME offers give seminarians opportunities to connect one-on-one, to go deep in their dialogue—and to advance at their own pace.

“There’s so much for our seminarians to try and juggle and sort through,” Trumm says. “Some of them have very little involvement or knowledge about any interfaith communities. Some have come from contexts where interfaith relations are a feature of daily life. So, we don’t approach programming with a one-size-fits-all mindset. We strive to reach people where they are, so we can move forward together.” 🌱





‘I’VE LEARNED THAT GOD IS RARELY EARLY, BUT NEVER LATE’

LSTC alum John Kotovsky MDiv ‘98 on philanthropic giving and the future of the church

By Rhiannon Koehler

When John Kotovsky walked into the partner’s office at Arthur Andersen and declared, “I quit,” he didn’t have another job lined up. What he did have was faith that something better lay ahead.

After five-and-a-half years on track to partnership, averaging between 400 and 600 hours of overtime each year, this version of professional success no longer felt worth the things he’d had to sacrifice to attain it.

“I would leave in the morning before my wife was up and come home at night after she was already asleep,” Kotovsky said. “That takes a toll on you.”

That “I quit” set Kotovsky on a winding journey through business, ministry, and nonprofit leadership; one marked by hard work, resilience, and faith in God’s timing.

“I’ve learned that God is rarely early, but never late,” he said. “There are moments when I thought, ‘How is this going to work?’ And in the last minute, something always came through.”

Today, Kotovsky is not only known for his success in business, congregational leadership and senior services, but also as a generous philanthropist whose commitment to LSTC reflects a conviction that giving is both obligation and joy. His story is not simply about professional success. It is about leaning into a faith-filled calling and ensuring that future generations have the chance to do the same.

“

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE GOD STANDS IN YOUR LIFE, LOOK AT YOUR CHECKBOOK AND YOUR CALENDAR. WHERE YOUR MONEY GOES AND WHERE YOUR TIME GOES, THAT’S YOUR FAITH.

JOHN KOTOVSKY

A LIFE SHAPED BY CALL AND SERVICE

Kotovsky’s connection to the Lutheran church runs deep. As a high schooler in St. Louis, he witnessed two formative events – the trauma of the Concordia Seminary walkout and the birth of Seminex.

Later, as district Luther League president, he traveled to Tanzania as a delegate to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly, an experience that gave him “a much broader understanding of the greater Lutheran church.”

When he sensed a mid-life calling to ministry, Kotovsky had the opportunity to be mentored by Rev. Ron

Glusenkamp, a Seminex grad and his pastor. Kotovsky also studied under Robert W. Bertram, Frederick William Danker, and other Seminex professors teaching in St. Louis. Eventually, Kotovsky’s candidacy committee required him to spend a year at a Lutheran seminary—and LSTC, with faculty he already admired, was the natural choice.

“It was great. I felt very blessed by it,” he said.

By then, Kotovsky had already established himself in business. After leaving Arthur Andersen, he served as CFO for a large family-owned real estate development company.

“I learned how to look at a deal, understand the essence, and set aside what didn’t matter,” he explained. “It created a nest egg, and when I sensed a calling to seminary, that was my safety net. I could provide for my wife and three children.”



John Kotovsky, MDiv '98, speaking at a conference.



John Kotovsky and his wife, Elaine. “When I was younger, I used to worry a lot about money,” John Kotovsky said. “God always got the leftovers. But when my wife, Elaine, and I became tithers—giving away the first 10 percent of our income—we never worried again. From that day forward, I can tell you, we have had manna-in-the-desert stories.”

That sense of provision carried through his time in parish ministry and later in a variety of leadership roles. At Community Church of Joy in Arizona, an 11,000-member congregation, he helped steward a multi-million-dollar budget that frequently relied on last-minute provision.

“At 11:59, we’d get a million-dollar gift,” he remembered of tight deadlines and the anxieties of managing an operational budget that was routinely about one-million dollars short of what the congregation needed to thrive.

Eventually, his path led back to St. Louis, where he became CEO of Lutheran Senior Services, then the 14th largest nonprofit in the United States. Yet even as he led large organizations, Kotovsky never lost his philosophy of servant leadership.

“One day a year, I’d go into the communities and do whatever staff wanted ... the story of my first job, starting out as a dishwasher, was legendary,” he said. “Later, my message was always, no

job is more important or less important. We are a team.”

For Kotovsky, leadership was never about hierarchy, but about dignity. “Serving others was my witness of faith. That’s what we all should be doing.”

GIVING AS FAITH, OBLIGATION, AND LEGACY

Kotovsky’s generosity toward LSTC is rooted in a deeply personal theology of stewardship.

He grew up with very little. “My father was a taxicab driver. I didn’t own a new pair of jeans until I was 17,” he shared. “We were poor, but my mom always reminded us that God is a God of abundance, not scarcity.”

Kotovsky likes to say



IF YOU KNEW THE TRUE COST OF YOUR EDUCATION, YOU’D REALIZE YOU WERE STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF OTHERS WHO GAVE. YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION, A RESPONSIBILITY, TO DO THE SAME FOR THE NEXT GENERATION.

JOHN KOTOVSKY

where God stands in your life, look at your checkbook and your calendar. Where your money goes and where your time goes, that’s your faith.”

Kotovsky is particularly inspired by LSTC’s Project Starling, which he sees as vital to preparing future leaders. “The greatest challenge in the church today is leadership. Too often, we prepare people to be chaplains rather than evangelists. I like Project Starling because it recognizes that pastors also need to be CEOs and CFOs,” he said. “If seminaries can revamp how they prepare women and men for ministry, the church can have a renaissance.”

Kotovsky is beginning to think of himself as an ancestor now. He wants to leave a legacy anchored in faith.

“It’s not about being remembered for what I’ve done, but what can be passed on to others,” he shared. “Faith, leadership, and resources that help people grow God’s kingdom.”

From meeting his wife in a Lutheran nursing home when he worked in the kitchen and she worked as a nurse’s aide to leading one of the nation’s largest nonprofit senior living organizations, Kotovsky has seen God’s hand in every step of his life..

“People say God doesn’t have a plan for your life. I can tell you that at every single step of my life, God has been molding and preparing me according to his plan.”

And to fellow alumni and friends of LSTC, his message is clear: “If you knew the true cost of your education, you’d realize you were standing on the shoulders of others who gave. You have an obligation, a responsibility, to do the same for the next generation.” 🌱



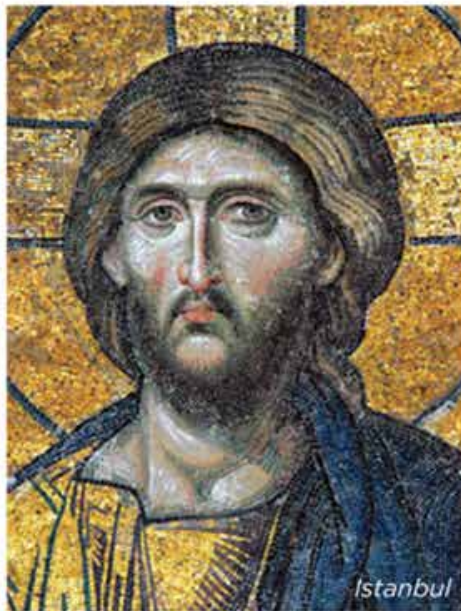
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CALLING AS COVENANT

How solo backpacking over 3,000 miles alongside my seminary career aided in my discernment

By **Lyndsay Monser**

Starting seminary fresh off a 2,194.3-mile thru hike of the Appalachian Trail, I was acutely aware of the lessons God was teaching me through nature. When I came into LSTC's orientation three years ago, I had just spent nearly six months adventuring at a pace slow enough to witness the entire lifecycle of some wildflowers; to say I was in tune with creation would be an understatement—I recognized I was part of creation in a way living outside for half a year could only ever teach me.

It's a sense of connection I have been lucky enough to renew every summer as I work toward completing my MDiv, with hikes on the Long Trail in Vermont, the Superior Hiking Trail on the North Shore of Minnesota, and, most recently, the Colorado Trail.

The Superior Hiking Trail

thru-hike also involved an independent study on the Spirituality of Backpacking, advised by Dr. Benjamin Stewart. Through that project, I learned that the better access a zip code has to trails, the less likely its population is to go to church. In other words, a significant part of America evidently feels spiritually fed enough by their outdoor recreation that they do not seek out faith communities in addition.

It is with this statistic in mind that I feel my seminary education would not have been complete without these hikes, without these opportunities to renew my own body, mind, and soul as well as connect with a whole host of characters. Indeed, the trail is one of the last places I have found where not only is it acceptable, but it is expected to end your day sitting around a dinner table with, for example, a gun-owning middle-aged

dad from Oklahoma on your left and a queer teenager from Brooklyn on your right. These are the types of daily encounters I have had on my thru hikes that undoubtedly sharpened my ability to connect with God's people across all demographics. In traveling and sharing a simple life together, the thru-hiking community is the closest thing to the early Christian community as it is described in Acts that I have ever discovered.

More than anything, however, embarking on my hiking career at the same time as my seminary one has revealed to me that creation is our greatest spiritual director, if we are willing to let it be. One of the most profound examples I have of this sentiment is the rhododendron leaf, which the southern half of the Appalachian Trail is absolutely littered with. As I wound my way through the ancient mountains of

Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia, my steps were often bordered by these small green leaves, leaves which I noticed rarely fell to the ground but rather curled in on themselves when it got cold. In conversation with other hikers, I learned the rhododendrons did this as a means of survival: they would not die at the first sign of winter, but rather do everything they could to protect themselves against the cold weather conditions. They use every tool at their disposal to find their way through, the same way that I have found myself needing to constantly adapt to changing conditions throughout these past few years at LSTC. It is one lesson of many I gleaned on the trail and have found myself returning to throughout my journey of discernment.

I first felt the call to ministry in high school, long before I felt the call to wander through the mountains for months on end. Still, I know that these adventures have been crucial to my formation. I would not be the ministerial leader I am today without each and every mile hiked. 🌿



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