

# Report of Western Theological Seminary

## Mission Statement

By God's grace, Western Theological Seminary forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God's ongoing redemptive work in the world.

## Overview

The 2021–2022 academic year has been a fruitful one for Western Theological Seminary (WTS). Certainly, dealing with COVID-19 and strengthening the seminary's finances during a pandemic were not easy. Yet, one of our faculty members, Rev. Dr. Winn Collier, noted, "I sense growing hopefulness and anticipation about the direction we're heading. With new faculty and staff joining us and increasingly honest conversations about our life together, we seem to be experiencing signs of life that suggest to me that the Spirit is at work. I've also had an increasing number of breakthrough conversations with students, as they open their heart and their pain and their hopes. It's been a genuine gift. I've had to go find tissues to have on hand in my study, for when the tears flow. I take that as another sign of the Holy Spirit at work, mending and healing. Amen."

Rev. Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline remarked in her report to the Board of Trustees, "It is our fervent prayer that the Holy Spirit of Christ will, in this season of change and growth, go before us, making the way straight; go with us and in us, filling our journey with peace and joy; and go behind us, to purify and renew what we have done and left undone and to water the seeds we plant."

## Enrollment

Western Theological Seminary began the fall 2021 semester with a total of 386 students, the highest enrollment in the seminary's history. The enrollment number places Western in the top 15 percent of seminaries in the U.S. and Canada in terms of head count. It also represents a third straight year of enrollment growth for the seminary, a growth that is fueled primarily by a growing Hispanic Ministry program, a blossoming doctor of ministry program, and a renewed attention to the In-Residence Master's program as the COVID-19 vaccine became more readily available.

The enrollment growth over the past three years has resulted in a significant boost to the overall tuition revenue of the seminary. At the same time, net tuition revenue needs to continue to be a larger part of the seminary's overall financial profile. Increasing the seminary's net tuition revenue through offering new degree programs and becoming more adaptable to the scheduling and pedagogical needs of adult learners and second career students will be a major focus for the seminary in the coming years.

## \$1 Million Grant from the Lilly Foundation

In November 2021, Western Theological Seminary was selected to be the recipient of a \$1 million grant from the Lilly Foundation as a part of their Pathways for Tomorrow initiative, an initiative that "is designed to help theological schools strengthen and sustain their capacities to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches."

The grant has two parts. The first part of the grant will be used to fund initiatives related to the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination. The center, which was established in February 2020, exists to promote the pastoral theology of Eugene Peterson for future scholarship, the health of pastors, and the church's renewed imagination. The center will steward the Peterson papers and archives, promote robust learning, create generative models for pastoral formation, and provide resources to encourage pastors for sustainable, joyful, and courageous ministry. The center launched three Doctor of Ministry cohorts over this past year. The first two were fully subscribed with 20 students per cohort. The third one will begin in October 2022 and will be taught by Drs. Jeff and Karen Barker (emeritus professors, Northwestern College).

The second part of the grant will be used to grow the burgeoning Hispanic Ministry Program at Western. The grant will enable Western to hire another bilingual Spanish-English faculty member so that the seminary can offer a Master of Arts in Christian Studies program in the Spanish language, as well as support the highly subscribed Graduate Certificate in Pastoral Studies program and the doctor of ministry cohorts in Spanish. Beginning in the summer of 2023, the seminary will also host a weeklong Hispanic Summer Institute program in Holland, Michigan.

### **Founders' Day**

The seminary launched the inaugural Founders' Day lecture. The lecture is designed to reflect on specific time periods over the course of the institution's history in order to draw wisdom for the present and strength for the future. The inaugural lecture will be given by Dr. David Komline, associate professor of church history, and is titled, "On Being Reformed: The Theological Vision of I. John Hesselink."

### **New Master's Programs**

According to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), while enrollment in master of divinity programs has declined by 17 percent over the last 15 years, the decline has also been balanced by the accelerating enrollment growth of 18 percent over just the last 5 years in various MA programs. For the first time in the history of ATS, MDiv credit hours represent less than 50 percent of total credit hours across all seminaries.

In response to this trend, the faculty of Western Theological Seminary unanimously and enthusiastically approved four new master of arts programs in the following areas:

- Master of Arts in Biblical Studies
- Master of Arts in Disability and Ministry
- Master of Arts in Ministry
- Master of Arts in Theology

The faculty also authorized a Spanish-language master of arts in Christian Ministry, which means that the seminary now has full degree Spanish-language offerings at the certificate level, master's level, and doctoral level.

## **Strategic Plan**

Over the past 18 months, the seminary has intentionally engaged a strategic plan process that will guide the focus of the seminary for the next three years. We anticipate that the strategic plan will be approved by the Board of Trustees at the May board meeting. The four themes of the strategic plan are as follows:

1. By June 2025, WTS will have developed and launched new degree programs and initiatives that equip students and churches to faithfully and innovatively engage the cultural and ecclesial challenges of ministry and leadership in our time.
2. By June 2025, WTS will be a vibrant learning community marked by the intentional integration of rigorous theological education with holistic spiritual formation.
3. By June 2025, WTS will increase its capacity and capability to support and sustain programs through investment in technology, institutional processes, and endowment for student scholarships, academic chairs, and institutional operations.
4. By June 2025, WTS will have solidified its commitment to a biblically rooted vision of racial/ethnic diversity and to practices of reconciliation and will have grown its institutional capacity for intercultural competency.

## **Trustee Changes**

Trustees Gail Ebersole (chair), Chris Crawford, and Kerm Campbell will conclude their terms of service on June 30, 2022. No new trustees were elected to the board this academic year.

## **Faculty News**

On April 11, 2022, dean and vice president of academic affairs Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson was installed to the G.W. and Edna Haworth Chair of Educational Ministries and Leadership.

The G.W. and Edna Haworth Chair of Educational Ministries and Leadership was originally established in 1999 during the presidency of Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil. Rev. Dr. George Brown occupied the chair until his retirement in 2012. The chair was redirected in 2021 to support the work and office of the dean of the seminary, allowing much needed financial resources to be rechanneled toward other core teaching functions of the seminary while still providing the necessary resources for the dean to conduct research, writing, and publication, three primary responsibilities that are often sacrificed when a faculty member moves into administration and gives oneself to the task of adminis-trivia.

The inaugural lecture, delivered by Dr. Kristen Johnson, was titled “Cultivating Kingdom Imagination: A Vision of Discipleship and Institutional Engagement.” Responses to the lecture were given by Dr. James Davison Hunter, LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia; Dr. John Inazu, Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion and Professor of Political Science at Washington University in St. Louis; and Rev. Fleming Rutledge, Episcopalian priest, distinguished theologian, and accomplished author.

Below please find a non-exhaustive sampling of faculty engagement and activities with the church and with the academy throughout the course of the year.

- **Dr. Carol Bechtel** is entering a season of travel to introduce her Bible study curriculum, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight*, which she wrote as the national Bible study for Presbyterian Women, the women's organization of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In March 2022, she traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, to speak for the Presbytery of the Grand Canyon. In April, she will head to Montreat, North Carolina, for the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. In late April, she will be leading a Sabbath retreat for RCA women at Warwick Conference Center in Warwick, New York. She is also preaching on Palm Sunday at the Waldensian Presbyterian Church in Valdese, North Carolina. She would appreciate your prayers for traveling mercies!
- **Dr. Chuck DeGroat** has continued a full schedule of speaking and of leading retreats. He writes, "In January, I led a three-day intensive retreat in my ongoing work as a faculty member for the Soul Care Institute." He has also traveled out to Silicon Valley to do a retreat for alumni pastors and leaders of the Bay Area's Wellspring Soul Care program, done some training and soul care from a distance with the faculty of the John Brown University clinical mental health program, and offered an online seminar for Gravity Leadership in March on mental health for leaders in the church today. He also shares, "Beyond this, I'm involved in a number of conversations right now about the current state of the church and the trauma of spiritual abuse. One of these conversations has been an ongoing one with Mike Cospers at CT [*Christianity Today*], consulting for the podcast *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*. I'm also involved in a conversation with other leaders around how to help churches rethink their use of NDAs [non-disclosure agreements]. And I continue to counsel a number of pastors."
- **Dr. David Komline** led a three-week adult education course at Thornapple Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and attended the final meetings of the Commission on Theology before his term expires at the end of June 2022. He also helped to author the commission's report to General Synod 2022. He is scheduled to attend the Conference on Faith and History in his capacity as book review editor for their journal *Fides et Historia* in late March and to deliver the inaugural WTS Founders' Day Lecture, "On Being Reformed: The Theological Vision of I. John Hesselink" in April.
- On January 27, **Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline** gave a lecture in this year's Scripture and Ministry series at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School entitled "The Art of Willing." During the same visit, she also delivered an evening address entitled "Augustine in the Pulpit" and participated in the Stott Award Consultation, which brings together pastors, parishioners, and professors to discuss theological topics of relevance to the contemporary life of the church. Her essay "Calvin and Przywara's *Analogia Entis*: A New Start for an Old Debate" was published in *Pro Ecclesia* in March. She is grateful for the feedback on this piece from colleague Dr. Todd Billings! She also recently completed an essay on Augustine's preaching on grace and human willing for the *Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Sermons*. She is learning the ropes of serving as a co-editor of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* and has been serving on the search committee for the new executive director of the Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia.

- **Dr. Suzanne McDonald** writes, “It was a joy to be the Teacher-in-Residence at Central Reformed Church in Grand Rapids over the month of March. The theme was ‘Walking with the Spirit.’ I preached and led worship, and we explored aspects of the person and work of the Holy Spirit through adult education sessions, a weekly evening reading group over Zoom, and informal discussion times. On the weekend of the 2nd and 3rd of April, I will be at Granite Springs Church in California, leading a Saturday morning seminar on ‘Dealing Faithfully With Dementia,’ and preaching on the Sunday morning.” Dr. McDonald will also be teaching a three-part adult education series at Third Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, on May 8, 15, and 22 titled “In the End, What?: Thinking Well About Eschatology.”
- **Dr. David Stubbs’s** article “Visiting Prisoners in Jesus’ Day,” to be printed in *Christianity Today* 66/3 (April 2022), has just been released ([www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/prison-ministry-history-visiting-prisoners-in-jesus-day.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/prison-ministry-history-visiting-prisoners-in-jesus-day.html)). Also, he has given presentations on “Visiting the Prisoner ... in a Classroom,” to two classes at Hope College and at Rose Park Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, this last month. The Hope-Western Prison Education Program is busy recruiting its second cohort—and they will be transferred to the Muskegon Correctional Facility and start orientation in July.
- **Dr. Travis West** is grateful and excited to report that he recently signed a contract with Tyndale Publishers to publish the book on Sabbath he began working on during his sabbatical in the spring of 2021! It is likely going to be part of their new Refresh Series, which focuses on practices for embodied faith that lead to health, wellness, and shalom. The tentative title is *The Art of the Sabbath*. He has also been a co-editor (along with Rev. April Fiet, WTS alum ’07) for the Women of the Bible study series produced by the RCA, celebrating the stories of female characters in the Bible on behalf of the whole church. The first volume was released at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the second volume was released this spring. The third volume is currently being edited.
- Finally, this year we also said farewell to two important lives in the history of the institution. Mrs. Lenora Ridder, wife of former president Dr. Herman “Bud” Ridder, passed away on March 19. Dr. Bill Brownson, former professor of preaching and president emeritus of Words of Hope, passed away on April 1.

### **New Faculty**

Western Theological Seminary is pleased to announce the hiring of three new faculty members to join its core faculty. These faculty members are:

- Dr. Tim Basselin, director of student formation and community life (Fuller Theological Seminary)
- Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst, Richard C. Oudersluys Associate Professor of World Christianity (Boston University)
- Dr. Madison Pierce, associate professor of New Testament (University of Durham)

### **Staff Retirement**

Norm Donkersloot, vice president of finance, concluded 35 years of faithful and committed service to the seminary on March 20, 2022. Norm is a man of integrity and always had the best interests of the seminary at heart. He served under four different presidents, beginning with Marv Hoff, then Dennis Voskuil, Tim Brown, and concluding with the current administration. Jon Dockery has been named as chief financial officer and vice president of finance.

## **Resolution**

*Declaring James V. Brownson General Synod Professor Emeritus*

Rev. Dr. James V. Brownson, professor of New Testament, retired from Western Theological Seminary effective August 27, 2021. In honor of his faithful service, President Theonugraha and Dean Johnson, together with the Board of Trustees and faculty of Western Theological Seminary, therefore recommend that he be declared retired and that a resolution be brought to the 2022 General Synod to declare him a General Synod professor emeritus.

### **TE 22-3**

**WHEREAS Dr. James V. Brownson, James and Jean Cook Professor of New Testament, was a student at Western from 1977 to 1980, and was selected by the faculty to be the recipient of the Henry J. Pietenpol Senior Excellence Award; and**

**WHEREAS Dr. Brownson was then ordained in the Reformed Church in America in 1980 and served as an associate pastor at Faith Reformed Church in Traverse City, Michigan; and**

**WHEREAS Dr. Brownson then went on to earn a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Princeton Theological Seminary; and**

**WHEREAS Dr. Brownson then returned to serve as assistant professor of New Testament in 1989 until his retirement in 2021; and**

**WHEREAS Dr. Brownson also served as the academic dean of the seminary from 1996 to 2004, and then again as interim academic dean from 2015 to 2016; and**

**WHEREAS throughout his time at WTS, Prof. Brownson has distinguished himself as a teacher, scholar, author, and administrator, forming generations of students through his teaching, the Reformed Church in America through his consistent denominational service, the wider church through his writings, and the ongoing shape of WTS curricula and academic programs through his administration, Dr. Brownson's legacy will long endure;**

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 215th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting at Central College in Pella, Iowa, on June 9–14, 2022, expresses its deepest gratitude to Dr. Brownson for his years of service, and offers its prayers for a fulfilling retirement;**

**AND BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that the Rev. Dr. Jim Brownson be declared a General Synod professor emeritus as of June 15, 2022.**

*Request to the General Synod for Western to be an “Officially Related” Institution*

The Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary requests permission from the General Synod to permit the seminary to become an officially related institution of the RCA like Hope College, Northwestern College, and Central College. We believe that moving to an officially related status will result in many mutually beneficial outcomes for both the denomination and the institution.

According to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), we are in the middle of a significant sea of change in theological education. ATS is projecting that sometime in this decade, the total number of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in ATS schools will exceed that of white students. Western Theological Seminary is experiencing some aspects of this change as well. Seven out of fourteen admitted in-residence students for fall 2022 are students of color, including five African American students; eight out of fourteen admitted distance-learning students for fall 2022 are students of color, including five Latino students from the Los Angeles area.

Altogether, theological education is in the midst of a demographic transition that will continue to accelerate through the end of the decade. According to ATS, 25 years ago, the most common student in ATS schools would have been a white male student from a mainline tradition, studying in-residence in the MDiv program, attending a seminary that belongs to the same denomination as their parents, funded by the denomination, and preparing for ministry in that same denomination.

By the end of this decade, the most common student in theological education will be a racial/ethnic minority student from a broadly Protestant tradition, equally likely to be male or female, equally likely to enroll in an MA program as an MDiv program, studying part-time as a commuter/distance-learning student, attending a seminary that does not belong to the same denomination as their parents, or altogether non-denominational, not funded by a denomination, and not pursuing ministry in a denomination. Geographical proximity will, by far, become the single most important factor in the seminary selection process, followed by theological alignment.

*Responding to these trends is the foundational motivation for Western’s request to the General Synod. We seek to place the seminary in a position that will allow us to respond with agility and creativity to meet the changing demands for theological education so that Western can be increasingly sustainable for the future. We live in a time of increasing naiveté and unfamiliarity toward denominations and, by extension, denominational seminaries. The perception of denominational seminaries is that they primarily employ faculty who are ordained in that denomination and are focused primarily on training students for that denomination. Moving to an “officially related” status will allow Western to better recruit and foster relationships with a broader prospective student pool, including students from other denominations and church networks.*

Delegates may recall that the seminary’s original request, submitted to General Synod 2021, was to become an “affiliated” institution of the RCA. This request was referred to the General Synod Council (GSC) in consultation with the Commission on Church Order (CCO) for further

consideration. In January, the CCO made its advisory response available. The commission's response focused on four areas:

1. Instead of being "affiliated" with the RCA, the provision given by the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* is for Western to become an "officially related" institution of the RCA.
2. The *BCO* outlines two criteria for an institution to become an "officially related" institution:
  - a. The institution's organizing documents must be approved by the General Synod.
  - b. The institution's governing board must include three General Synod-appointed trustees at all times.
3. The CCO recommends that a reversion clause of the seminary's assets be included so that if the seminary ever ceases operation, the assets will revert to the RCA.
4. Any amendments to the bylaws regarding the three General Synod-appointed trustees as well as the reversion of assets clause would require approval by the General Synod.

The Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary has reviewed these recommendations and has unanimously affirmed the acceptance of these four recommendations. Western therefore presented to the GSC in March 2022 an updated set of amendments to its bylaws and articles of incorporation that took these four recommendations into account. As directed by the General Synod in TE 21-5, the updated proposed amendments to WTS's bylaws and articles of incorporation are included in the GSC's report on referrals from General Synod 2021; please see pages 81-109 of this workbook.

The CCO also recommended to the GSC that, should the General Synod approve the proposed amendments to WTS's bylaws and articles of incorporation, the GSC consider bringing a recommendation to the General Synod to designate Western Theological Seminary as an agent of the General Synod in order to best serve students who are currently seeking their Certificate of Fitness for Ministry at the seminary. The seminary is amenable to this recommendation as well, while also noting that the three theological agents have requested further review of the necessity of the Certificate of Fitness for Ministry (CFM) for the theological agents.

Should the General Synod choose to approve the proposed amendments to Western's bylaws and articles of incorporation (RF 22-1; see pages 88-98) but not to subsequently designate Western as a theological agent (RF 22-2; see page 98, the board of the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency has agreed to grant CFMs to students at Western who have submitted their Form V to the seminary by June 30, 2022, and who have satisfied the seminary's institutional requirements for receiving the CFM.

In conclusion, the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary formally requests approval from the General Synod for WTS to become an officially related institution of the RCA.