

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 2022-2023 academic year was a banner year for Western Theological Seminary. By the grace of God, 433 students were enrolled across all degree programs for the fall semester. This represents a 29 percent increase in head count and a 50 percent growth in full-time equivalents since fall 2019. Our tuition revenue projection has also grown 40 percent since the 2019-2020 school year. One hundred and twenty-five students are enrolled in our Spanish-speaking programs, including 20 students in our newly launched Master of Arts in Christian Studies, which can be completed entirely in Spanish. Nearly 120 students were enrolled in our doctor of ministry program, and more than 120 additional students were enrolled in the master of divinity program. Students in these programs are either pastors or students who sense a call to the pastorate and ordained ministry. We give thanks to God for the privilege of educating these women and men who have been called by God to serve the church!

Western is also in the midst of change. Over the last two years, we have welcomed eight new faculty members. Dr. Wesley Hill (New Testament), Dr. David Escobar Arcay (theology), Dr. Winn Collier (ministry), Dr. Tim Basselin (ministry), Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst (mission), Dr. Madison Pierce (New Testament), Dr. Keith Starkenberg (theology), and Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas (theology) bring new energy and new excitement to the life and work of the seminary.

We have also added to our "senior" faculty. We continue to enjoy the wisdom and experience of Dr. Carol Bechtel (Old Testament), General Synod professor, and Dr. David Stubbs (theology), who are our longest tenured faculty. We have also added Dr. Sue Rozeboom (worship), Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline (theology), and Dr. David Komline (church history) to the ranks of our full professors.

New Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Western has continued to make considerable progress toward its goal of launching a new MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling in fall 2024. Western Theological Seminary's MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling is rooted in the foundational realities that we are created in and for relationship, as image-bearers of the Trinitarian God and ambassadors of God's shalom in a broken world. We will equip women and men to be wise, competent, and hopeful practitioners, attuned to their own selves and stories and anchored in God's story of redemption and restoration. Our relationally oriented and trauma-informed program will offer the most contemporary, research-based training while, at the same time, remaining deeply rooted in a longstanding Christian soul care tradition. Students will be equipped to

serve in a variety of counseling settings with a diverse array of clients of varying backgrounds or faiths. Students will be invited into a rich cohort experience at Western Theological Seminary within a community that pauses daily for prayer and worship and celebrates communion every Friday.

While the first cohort will begin in fall 2024, Western will soon begin offering courses as continuing education offerings for pastors, alumni, and prospective students. Registration is open!

We are also overjoyed that we have successfully recruited Dr. Elizabeth Pennock to serve as associate professor of counseling and director of the Master of Arts in Mental Health Counseling program beginning in the 2023-2024 school year.

Dr. Pennock brings exceptional experience to this position. She is currently serving as a faculty member and the director of a comparable program at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. In this role, she oversees the compliance of the program with the accreditation standards of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs.

Dr. Pennock's areas of expertise include trauma and trauma-informed care, counselor education and supervision, and spirituality and counseling. The dissertation she completed for her PhD in counselor education was titled, "Trauma-Informed Clergy: An Investigation of Factors Predicting the Trauma-Related Attitudes and Beliefs of Christian Clergy in Florida" (University of Central Florida). She has specialized training in trauma therapy that informs her research and teaching as well as her practice of counseling.

Dr. Pennock spent seven years doing mission work and church planting in Eastern Europe before pursuing her career in counseling, and her own experience in ministry and of walking alongside others in ministry directly shapes her sense of calling to this work. After completing her master's in counseling, alongside running a private practice, she spent six years working for a missions organization, providing counseling and crisis care for more than 1,000 employees as they engaged in ministry all over the world, assisting in the psychological assessments of applicants to help assess their readiness for ministry, and training staff members in things like spiritual and emotional formation and cultural adjustment.

Dr. Pennock comes to this role with a deep commitment to Christ and the church and with a significant sense of being called to develop this new program at Western Theological Seminary. We are tremendously grateful that God opened the way for her to join us to provide leadership to this endeavor alongside current faculty member Dr. Chuck DeGroat.

\$1.15 Million Grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc.

In March 2022, Western Theological Seminary was selected to be the recipient of a \$1.15 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc. as a part of their Nurturing Children Through Worship 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 proposal is titled “Nurturing Children with Disabilities,” and it involves researching, putting into practice, and publishing the results of practices involved in the spiritual formation of children and persons with disabilities, practices that involve horses, nature, and art. Dr. Ben Conner will provide leadership to the grant.

Other Seminary News

The Hispanic Ministry Program continues to enroll certificate and MA students throughout the country. Our first Hispanic Summer Institute will be held online this May, featuring courses offered in Spanish by our faculty members Dr. David Escobar and Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas. Through this program, students from Western Theological Seminary (WTS) and other Association of Theological Schools–accredited schools are able to take one-week intensive courses. As we pilot the Institute this summer, all courses will be online; we will be working toward in-person courses in summer 2024. You can learn more about this summer’s offerings in this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnUYMviiGvs.

Our doctor of ministry program, under the interim leadership of Dr. Chuck DeGroat, is currently offering nine cohorts. Two additional cohorts are launching this spring: “Hungering for God: Pastor as Spiritual Guide” with Tom Schwanda and “Performing the Bible” with Karen and Jeff Barker. Plans are in process for more cohorts to launch next year.

The Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination’s two DMin cohorts continue to be formative for those involved. Kingfisher Society groups (circles of friendship and soul care for pastors) are launching. The Peterson Center welcomed musician duo Poor Bishop Hooper to lead a “Golgotha Experience” during the Lenten season. Author Sophronia Scott will offer a public reading from her recent works on April 25. The Peterson Center is joining with The Porter’s Gate to set *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, to music. Songwriters will gather to write and record songs from Peterson’s translation, which can then be adapted for use in local church settings. The Doxology Conference will be held October 2-4, 2023; we anticipate another significant gathering of pastors, artists, and Christians who are looking to attend to God’s hopeful presence in their lives and in the world.

Strategic Plan

The seminary intentionally engaged in a strategic plan process that culminated in May 2022 when the Board of Trustees approved a strategic plan that will guide the focus of the seminary through 2025. 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.

In October 2022, the Board of Trustees approved the launch of a new capital campaign focusing on degrees in mental health counseling, increasing availability of scholarships for students, and bolstering the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, the Center for Disability and Ministry, and the Hispanic Ministry Program. As soon as the capital campaign launched, a donor couple committed a \$1.75 million challenge grant toward the counseling program. Several months later, another donor couple committed a \$1 million challenge grant to fund the Hispanic Ministry Program. By God's grace, we are on track to complete this capital campaign within the expected timeframe.

Founders' Day

In April 2023, WTS hosted the second Founders' Day lecture in the seminary's history. The lecture is designed to reflect on specific time periods in the course of the institution's history, in order to draw wisdom for the present and strength for the future. This year's Founders' Day lecture was given by Dr. Dennis Voskuil, president emeritus, and focused on the origin story of Western Theological Seminary.

Faculty News

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 celebrating the publication of "Upstairs, Downstairs: Hermeneutical Insights Based on the Structure of Job's Prologue" in *A Sage in New Haven: Essays on the Prophets, the Writings, and the Ancient World in Honor of Robert R. Wilson* (Zaphon: Ägypten und Altes Testament Series), which came out in February. She presented on "Sabbath" to an ecumenical gathering of women in Manistee, Michigan, on March 15. She is looking forward to preaching at First Presbyterian Church in Mishawaka, Indiana, on April 16 and presenting for the Lake Michigan Presbyterian Women at their gathering in Holland, Michigan, on April 22.

- **Dr. Todd Billings** recently published a new book chapter, “Reformed Catholicity,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 330-351. He also published, “Recovering the ‘Art of Dying’ for Lifelong Discipleship,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 1:3 (Fall 2022), pp. 7-12. Two of Dr. Billings’s articles made Faithward’s “Most Loved Resources of 2022” list, including a resource article, “Amazing Asian, Latin American, and Black Theologians Who Write About Reformed Theology” (www.faithward.org/amazing-asian-latin-american-and-black-theologians-who-write-about-reformed-theology), and a three-part video series for small group discussion on understanding the Bible (www.faithward.org/understanding-the-bible). The video series was also highlighted on the World Council of Reformed Churches blog on January 6. Finally, in October 2022, A Kernel of Wheat Christian Ministries published a beautiful Chinese edition and translation of *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ*.
- **Dr. Chuck DeGroat** had the opportunity to speak and lead retreats for The Spiritual Formation Society of Arizona and Redeemer Counseling Center in Orlando, Florida. He is also under contract for and in the process of finishing his next book, tentatively called *What Happens Within*, a book that explores how trauma wounds us and how we heal, through the lens of the three questions God asks in Genesis 3.
- **Dr. David Komline** has finished editing volume three of *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology, Reformed Church in America* and has turned it in to James Brumm, editor of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. He also has a forthcoming article in the *Calvin Theological Journal*, “Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed: The Theological Vision of I. John Hesselink,” based on his Founders’ Day lecture at WTS last year. In addition, he is working on the manuscript for a book tentatively titled *Confessional Kin: A History of the Reformed Communities in the United States*.
- **Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline** has entered a phase of her sabbatical where smaller research projects have been completed and she is focusing single-mindedly on her book. On February 8, she delivered a lecture in the Humboldt Lecture Series at the University of Tübingen on “The Idea of the New in Early Christian Thought.” The manuscript for this lecture provided a first draft of the opening chapter to her book. She was also featured as a “Fellow in Focus” by the university’s College of Fellows in the same month. Reviews of Han-luen’s first book, *Augustine on the Will*, continue to appear, including a 12-page essay in *The Journal of Theological Studies* that was published online in late February. She will be cheering on (from afar) the cohort of Iranian students who began a course of study developed in collaboration with Western Theological Seminary on March 1!
- In February, **Dr. Suzanne McDonald** preached and led adult education sessions on “Dealing Faithfully with Dementia” and “Creation Care: Why

Should Christians Care?” at various churches. In early March, she gave one of the keynote presentations at the Theology Matters conference and also offered adult education sessions on dementia to another church in West Michigan. In April, she will be preaching and leading an adult education series on a biblical understanding of prophecy, and she will be at Taylor University in Indiana on April 19 to preach in chapel, speak to several classes, and hold a seminar with some of Taylor University’s honors students on themes related to creation care as part of the campus’s reflections on Earth Day.

- **Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst** has recently led and been involved in several teaching and writing opportunities. She served as the keynote speaker at a conference on creation care and the church with leadership of Compassion International from across Latin America in Guatemala City, Guatemala, on January 24-25. She presented as part of the “On New Creation” module of the Institute of the Americas for Transformation and Reconciliation (an initiative that is a partnership of Duke Divinity School) on January 25. She continued work with the editorial team of “The Migration Bible” and produced an article on “Climate Change and Migration.”
- In late fall 2022, **Dr. Madison Pierce** joined *The Two Cities* podcast (www.thetwocities.com) and has been hosting conversations with leaders in the church and academy. Recently, the podcast has been hosting a series of conversations on disability—a future episode will feature Ben and Melissa Conner as well as the Friendship House!
- **Dr. Travis West** co-authored a curriculum entitled *Hebrew for Regular People* that was published by GlossaHouse. *Hebrew for Regular People* is an eight-week curriculum for congregations by Travis West and Hannah Stevens that translates some of the most innovative aspects of WTS’s Hebrew class into an accessible format for lay (“regular”) people. Volume 3 of the RCA’s *She Is Called Women of the Bible Study Series* was published in early November 2022. Travis is a co-editor of each of the three volumes, along with WTS grad Rev. April Fiet. Travis also contributed a study to this third volume, titled “Naomi: Resilient Hope in a World of Grief.”

Staff Retirement

Jill English, director of admissions, concluded 17 years of faithful and dedicated service to Western Theological Seminary on June 2, 2023. We will sorely miss our faithful colleague.