

## **Report of Western Theological Seminary**

By God's grace, Western Theological Seminary (WTS) forms women and men for faithful Christian ministry and participation in the Triune God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. We were reminded of this mission through the testimonies of the Doctor of Ministry students in the Holy Presence cohort. One student shared,

(When I started the program,) I was in a bit of a ministry crisis. I had experienced very close friends who had gone into major ministry catastrophes, moral failures, burnout...this (cohort) has given me a setting academically, a setting relationally, over these last three years, to really rethink a lot of things.

I think it saved my ministry life.

Another student shared,

In the past few months, I am praying as I've not prayed before. I am ministering as I have never ministered before. I feel transformed from the inside out. I am fixing my attention on God and, to my profound surprise, encountering God.

These quotes are reminders of the mission we strive to accomplish at Western Theological Seminary each and every day. We are an educational institution and a community of learning. Yet what sets us apart is that through all that we do, we seek to bring students into a genuine encounter with the holy Triune God, who, through the Holy Spirit, forms and shapes students into faithful pastors and leaders for the church. We do not form students alone. We do so in reliance and in step with the God who has demonstrated the fullness of his love through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

### **Reaffirmation of Accreditation**

Over this past academic year, Western Theological Seminary successfully secured a ten-year reaffirmation of accreditation from the Board of Commissioners of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Ten years is the maximum number of years reaccreditation can be given. We give thanks to God for his faithfulness toward Western Theological Seminary over these past ten years.

In addition to granting WTS the maximum of ten years of reaccreditation, the evaluation committee also noted the following strengths and areas of growth for the seminary. The launch and continued development of the Hispanic Ministry program, the comprehensive nature of our spiritual formation program, ongoing progress toward financial equilibrium, and an increasingly diverse faculty who teach in the core curriculum were all noted as strengths of the seminary.

The evaluation committee also noted three areas needing special attention and three areas requiring a report in the next few years. Developing a written marketing plan,

attending to the sustainability of the high-impact Abbey program, and cultivating an environment where staff thrives, especially in light of recent staffing reductions, were identified as areas needing attention. We will have ten years to make steady and persistent progress on these things.

The evaluation committee also identified three areas that need more short-term attention. These areas are differentiating the various master of arts programs, the doctor of ministry program, and a comprehensive plan for institutional evaluation.

In the next few years, we anticipate accreditation visits from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) to secure CACREP accreditation for the MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program.

Yet, even though the work continues, securing successful reaccreditation from the Board of Commissioners of ATS allows us an opportunity to give thanks to God and celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of the seminary faculty and staff, without whom the reaccreditation would have been much more cumbersome to secure. In particular, I (Felix Theonugraha) want to express my deep and heartfelt gratitude to John Brogan, who chaired the self-study steering committee, as well as to the members of the steering committee—Tim Basselin, Andy Bast, Jon Dockery, Theresa Hamm, Rayetta Perez, Lindsay Porter, David Stubbs, and Suzanne McDonald. Kristen Johnson also served as our internal reader.

## **Enrollment**

Western Theological Seminary is pleased to report another strong enrollment year for the 2023-2024 academic year, with a fall 2023 enrollment of 424 students. The fall 2023 enrollment is slightly lower than last year's record high of 433 students but still represents more than a 25 percent increase since fall 2019. Our enrollment growth continues to be driven by the Hispanic Ministries program and the doctor of ministry program. The new master of arts programs are also attracting new students and offsetting the slight decline in master of divinity enrollment. In particular, the master of arts in disability and ministry has continued to stand out as a unique degree offering.

## **Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program**

We welcomed Dr. Elizabeth Pennock to Western Theological Seminary as our new director of the Mental Health Counseling program. Under Dr. Pennock's leadership and in collaboration with Dr. Chuck DeGroat, we have launched the application for the new MA in clinical mental health counseling program. As of March 1, we have received 12 applications toward our goal of 24 students for the first cohort. Dr. Pennock previously served as the program director for the Master of Counseling program at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. In addition to her teaching expertise, Dr. Pennock is also a licensed mental health counselor in Florida and a licensed professional counselor in Michigan.

## Service to the Reformed Church in America

WTS continues to be committed to the formation and education of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). As of spring 2024, a total of 79 RCA students are enrolled at WTS. In addition, WTS, in partnership with New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) and the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency (MFCA), has made our courses available to MFCA candidates seeking to take courses in RCA polity, worship, history, missions, and Credo.

In March 2024, a delegation from WTS traveled to South America along with Rev. Dr. Andres Serrano, RCA director of church multiplication, and Rev. Fabio Sosa from the RCA's International Classis of Texas. The purpose of the trip was to meet RCA-ordained ministers of Word and sacrament as well as other candidates for ordination to discuss how WTS can be a partner in providing theological education for these individuals from the Global South. The delegation, which included Mr. Steve Spoelhof, board chair; Rev. Dr. Felix Theonugraha, president; and Dr. Alberto la Rosa Rojas, director of the Hispanic Ministries program, met with interested groups in Santiago, Chile; Mendoza, Argentina; and Buenos Aires, Argentina. There is a strong desire among pastors in these aforementioned cities to join the RCA. These pastors are excited about the possibility of joining a denomination with a rich history. They are committed pastors with a wealth of experience who desire further education and training so that they can be equipped to teach and pastor God's people in their locations.

## Seminary Hymn

Dr. Carol Bechtel has composed a hymn text commissioned for the WTS community to sing on special occasions such as Convocation and Commencement. Unlike an "alma mater" hymn, which is a song to an institution, the Western Theological Seminary Hymn is a song for a school. It is a hymn that captures who we are as a seminary and who we strive to be. It is an identity-forming hymn that reminds our community who we are and to whom we belong.

"Before the Face of God"

Tune: AURELIA

1. With grateful hearts we gather  
before the face of God—  
a flawed, forgiven body,  
yet gifted, formed, and called.  
From many places gathered  
as grain from many fields—  
diverse, yet still united,  
as grapes from many hills.
2. We seek no iv'ry tower,  
no place in which to hide—

but rather through our study  
your costly grace to find.  
Your prophets and your gospels  
equip us to relate  
the advent of salvation—  
the end of death and hate.

3. Through pulpit, font, and table  
we grow in faith and grace.  
In classrooms and in friendships  
we glimpse your loving face.  
O keep us ever learning,  
and may your Spirit teach  
through all of life's encounters,  
through ev'ry word we preach.
4. Now send us out for service,  
and lead us as we go—  
so ev'ry heart that's hurting  
your love and grace may know.  
Make our whole lives a witness,  
and keep us ever strong—  
until with all creation  
we sing your Sabbath song.

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### **Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry**

The Leonard F. Stoutemire Lecture in Multicultural Ministry is named in honor of the late Rev. Leonard Foster Stoutemire, pioneer African American clergyman and church planter to Holland, Michigan. Although originally he wanted to enlist into missionary service in Africa, in 1944, Rev. Stoutemire moved to Holland, Michigan, to plant the city's first intentionally multiracial and multiethnic congregation, the All Nations Full Gospel Church of Holland, a church that continues to worship to this day.

These lectures equip seminarians, faculty, staff, alumni, and local congregations with resources for increased intercultural competence for greater effectiveness in Christian ministry.

This year, we were extremely blessed to welcome Rev. Dr. Micah McCreary, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, to serve as the 2024 Stoutemire Lecturer. His lecture, "The Impact of Spirituality on Stress, Trauma, and Socio-Race," focused on signs and symptoms of socio-race trauma in African (Black), Latino/a/x, Asian, and Native American communities and how best practices from spirituality, clinical, and community psychology can lead to healing and well-being. President McCreary also delivered a powerful homily on "Power and Privilege" based on Psalm 62:5-9.

## **Compelling Preaching Grant**

Dr. Ron Rienstra has been collaborating with Dr. Jon Brown of Pillar Church on planning for the \$1.2 million Lilly Endowment grant WTS received. This grant fits into Lilly's larger Compelling Preaching program. In light of changes at Hope College, which have meant that there is not as much bandwidth there to collaborate on the grant, some adjustments have been made. Currently, at least two important prongs are being planned. First, there are plans to establish college-town church cohorts, which will bring together chaplains and students at multiple Christian colleges and pastors of churches in collegiate towns that have special ministries to those institutions. There are also plans to reimagine the Bast Preaching Festival (to be brought back in 2025) as events of collaborative, cohort-based learning where chaplains, professors, pastors, and students of preaching gather to talk about what the church needs preaching to be in this cultural moment. The grant will also support a number of initiatives at WTS: new courses in homiletics; the production of new teaching materials (short videos, podcasts, other new modalities) to disseminate what the cohorts are learning; two trips to Israel/Palestine; and the creation of a co-curricular, collaborative opportunity—the Preach, Pray, or Die Club—for students interested in preaching and/or hearing good preaching. We gratefully thank our colleague Ron for his extra work on this initiative in addition to his regular contributions to the life of our community.

## **A Sampling of Significant Seminary Events**

The first inaugural Great Lakes Theology Conference (GLTC) occurred on November 2-3, 2023, to great acclaim both at home and abroad. This conference, designed for people interested in attending seminary, attracted around 25 registrants and brought around 16 presenters to us. It was all the buzz at the American Academy of Religion! A highlight built into the schedule of the conference participants was the public Inaugural Lecture of Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst as the Richard C. Oudersluys Associate Professor of World Christianity (November 2). This was a wonderful way of showcasing our faculty and also generating energy and excitement for this important occasion to mark the gift of Dr. Padilla DeBorst's presence in our community. It was encouraging to see an excellent turnout at both the GLTC and the inaugural lecture. We are thrilled and excited at the prospect of seeing the GLTC grow in coming years. It expresses WTS's commitment to practice scholarly community in a way that is mutually encouraging and supportive and to empower students in their own theological research and discovery. We are deeply grateful to our colleagues Madison Pierce, Alberto La Rosa Rojas, Keith Starkenburg, Anne Chanski, and Lindsay Porter for their supererogatory labors and vision in leading us in these endeavors. In the words of one appreciative colleague, the Great Lakes Theology Conference is "a significant means for motivating students to grow in their theological articulation and a valuable means of recruitment."

On April 18, 2024, we will host our annual Founders' Day Lecture, followed by the President's Club lunch. Vern and Carla Sterk will deliver this year's lecture. Vern served in Chiapas, Mexico, for 41 years before returning to Western to serve as

professor of cross-cultural mission. Vern and Carla will share about the legacy of Western Theological Seminary in Chiapas.

On April 27, 2024, during this year's Commencement service, we will also honor this year's Alumnus of the Year, Dr. Peter Ford. Dr. Ford just recently retired as a missionary from RCA Global Mission, having served for 40 years all across northern Africa and the Middle East in places like Ethiopia, Oman, Sudan, and most recently, Lebanon. We will also have an opportunity to hear more from Peter during our board dinner on Friday, April 26.

## **Development**

Both the Seminary Fund and Capital Campaign concluded the first two quarters of the fiscal year on a strong note. Our Seminary Fund giving is at 66 percent of the annual goal, while the Capital Campaign has surpassed its initial seven-figure goal. As of February 2024, the Board of Trustees has established a new eight-figure goal for the campaign.

The foundation of the Capital Campaign is to raise \$5 million for the new master of arts in clinical mental health counseling. The rest of the campaign will go toward scholarships as well as several key initiatives, such as the Hispanic Ministries program, the Center for Disability and Ministry, the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, and other intercultural and international initiatives.

In terms of overall giving, this fiscal year is on track to exceed the total giving of the previous three years and will likely conclude the year as the third-highest giving year of the last decade.

## **Finance**

As a result of the strong giving year, we are pleased to report that our balance sheet is healthy. In fact, over the last 18 or so months, we have been able to pay off both our long-term and short-term debt and have remained out of our line credit since October 2023 until now. Our audited June 2023 balance sheet also showed a \$2 million increase in total assets since June 2022.

## **Faculty Achievements**

- **Dr. Carol Bechtel**, General Synod Professor, represented the American Waldensian Society at the Waldensian Synod in Torre Pellice, Italy, from August 20-25, 2023. Dr. Bechtel is currently on sabbatical, doing research and writing on sabbath. She spent March and April back in Torre Pellice with the Waldensians, who are celebrating their 850th anniversary this year. She will be giving the Commencement address for Western Theological Seminary in late April.
- **Dr. Todd Billings**, Gordon H. Girod Professor of Reformed Theology, launched a new Faith and Illness Initiative. The initiative aims to discover a theology of

vocation and virtue for Christians living with chronic illness and will be an interdisciplinary conversation between pastors, scholars, medical professionals, Christians living with chronic pain and illness, and their caregivers. The hope of the initiative is that books and other resources will be developed as a result of these conversations. Our 2024 colloquy theme is “Chronic Pain and Christian Discipleship” (September 16-18, 2024). In addition to the core group’s meetings, each colloquy will feature one to two public events and virtual reading groups so that the wider church, especially people living with chronic illness themselves, are invited to participate in the conversation.

- **Dr. Travis West** had an eventful semester of writing and speaking. He spent much of the semester immersed in writing and speaking about the sabbath. He is enjoying the process of revising his sabbath manuscript (forthcoming from Tyndale in 2025, tentatively titled *Radical Rest*) and is working closely with a fantastic editor. He had an opportunity to travel to San Antonio on October 20 to visit our former colleague Dr. Daniel Flores, who invited him to be the keynote speaker for the Texas Library Association’s District 10 Fall Conference, where he delivered a lecture titled, “The Sabbath Way: Finding the Rest Our Souls Crave,” delivered at the Holocaust Memorial Museum of San Antonio. He also spoke on the sabbath at Christ Memorial Church’s CCLI (adult education) class on October 22 and presented to the Phelps Scholars at Hope College for their annual Wellness Night in a talk titled, “The Sabbath Way: Finding Sustainable Rhythms of Rest and Delight” (November 15). He returned to San Antonio in November to attend the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) conference and presented a paper in the National Association of Professors of Hebrew section on the curriculum for our summer Hebrew class, titled “Advanced Hebrew: How to Design L2 Input to Facilitate Comprehension of a Biblical Text.” Finally, he celebrated the release of his dissertation as a book, which was published through GlossaHouse’s dissertation series and released just prior to SBL. It is titled *The Art of Biblical Performance: Biblical Performance Criticism and the Drama of Old Testament Narratives*.
- **Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline** delivered a talk on “A Kenosis of Breastfeeding: Augustine, Feminist Critiques, and the Paradox of Christ’s Kenosis” at a lunch for Christian women theologians for the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature. She has also done interviews with the *Augustine* and *History of Christian Theology* podcasts and wrote a reflection for the Advent issue of the *Pillar Journal*. This semester, her primary scholarly effort has been completing an essay on Augustine for the *Cambridge Companion to Early Christian Theology*. The Great Lakes Theology Conference was one of her favorite parts of the fall term—thank you to the colleagues who organized this splendid event.
- **Dr. David Komline** has had a busy semester directing the ThM program and stepping into a new role as coordinator of strategic international initiatives. On the church front, in October, he spoke at an adult education class at Third

Reformed Church in Holland on the theology of John Hesselink and, in December, he preached at Freedom Village in Holland. His ongoing scholarly projects continue to progress: *The Church Speaks, Volume 3* should be published and physical copies should be circulating by the time of General Synod 2024. He also continues to edit book reviews for *Fides et Historia*.

- We are delighted **Dr. Madison Pierce** has recently come under care of the Holland Classis (RCA). Since WTS's last report to General Synod, she has delivered three research presentations: "Cultic Christologies in Hebrews," Scripture and Doctrine Seminar, Institute for Biblical Research (IBR) Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas; "Exodus 33 and the 'Greater Tent' in Hebrews," Intertextuality Section, SBL Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas; "Exodus 33 and the 'Greater Tent' in Hebrews," Hebräersymposium, Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach, Ewersbach, Germany (online). Dr. Pierce also preached at 14th Street Christian Reformed Church, taught a three-week adult education series on Hebrews at Thornapple Community Church (Grand Rapids, Michigan), taught an adult education class on the eschatology of Hebrews (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan), and continues to lead the consistory of Third Reformed Church through a conversation on communion.
- **Dr. Alberto La Rosa** served as a guest conference speaker for the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH) in their seventh annual Justo and Catherine Gonzalez Lecture Series. He presented on compelling preaching in immigrant communities to both Spanish and English audiences and received much positive feedback. He also taught on eschatology and migration at the adult education class at Kirk in the Hills in Bloomfield Township. Dr. La Rosa also shares the wonderful news that he has a book contract with Baker for a book provisionally titled *A Theology of a Home in an Age of Migration*. The manuscript is due December 2024.
- The \$1.25 million "Nurturing Children with Disabilities" grant, made possible by a generous gift from the Lilly Endowment, is underway. The Summer Symposium on Disability and Ministry, under the leadership of **Dr. Ben Conner**, was attended by over 150 people in person and online. Dr. Conner also reports that the first book in the co-branded series between IVP Academic and the Center for Disability and Ministry is out! This book, *Disabling Leadership*, includes (as will all books in the series) the purpose statement of the Center and a link to WTS's website. It was written by three authors with disabilities. The second book in the series (by Rochelle Scheuermann of Wheaton College, on evangelism and disability) is in the works, as is the next volume (co-authored by John Swinton and Dr. Conner, titled *Missing Voices in Disability Theology*).
- The Hope-WTS Theology Seminar, a colloquium that brings together faculty interested in theology from Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, continued to gather. On October 6, Dr. Steven Bouma-Prediger, Leonard and Marjorie Maas Professor of Reformed Theology at Hope College, presented a



paper entitled, “Does Anybody Feel At Home?: The Many Faces of Homelessness in a Culture of Displacement.” On November 10, David Komline presented a paper emerging from some of his sabbatical research: “The Puritan Teaching Office: Overlooked Evidence on the Salem-Plymouth Relation.” This colloquium continues to be a treasured opportunity for dialogue and exchange, not only with colleagues at Hope College but also with our own colleagues at “home” at WTS.

- This year’s Doxology gathering, hosted by the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, was attended by over 200 people and included a concert by The Porter’s Gate, who put Eugene’s *The Message* translation of the Psalms to music. We are pleased that in year two, we have reached our five-year attendance goal for the Doxology gathering. Doxology will once again be held on September 30–October 2, 2024. As of March 1, 130 of 240 spots have been reserved.
- WTS hosted the inaugural Great Lakes Theology Conference ([gltc.westernsem.edu](http://gltc.westernsem.edu)) on November 2-3, 2023. The conference is a recruiting opportunity for the seminary as we invite undergraduate students and others aspiring to attend seminary to come and present a theological paper. I am grateful for the leadership of Dr. Madison Pierce, along with Dr. Alberto La Rosa Rojas and Dr. Keith Starckenburg, for this event.
- **Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst** was installed as the Richard C. Oudersluys Chair of World Christianity on November 2 as a part of the Great Lakes Theology Conference. Her lecture was titled, “Cultivating Community: Space for Life in a Disintegrating World.”
- **Dr. Winn Collier** has recently spoken for the Hope Road Counseling Retreat (Longview, Texas), the Pace-Warren Lecture Series at Second Presbyterian Church (Lexington, Kentucky), The Henry Center at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois), a Pillar Church men’s gathering (Holland, Michigan), and Jamestown Reformed Church (Jamestown, Michigan).
- A piece **Dr. Wesley Hill** wrote last summer, “Jesus and the Transformation of Gender,” for *Comment* 41/3 (Fall 2023): 107-116 has appeared in print and online at [www.comment.org/jesus-and-the-transformation-of-gender](http://www.comment.org/jesus-and-the-transformation-of-gender). He is currently working to complete his manuscript for *Easter: The Season of the Resurrection of Jesus* for InterVarsity Press’s Fullness of Time series and has also had several speaking and preaching engagements during the fall 2023 semester: the RadVo (Radical Vocation) conference at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Dallas, Texas, September 21-22; Gallery Church, Baltimore, Maryland, October 28-29; and The Episcopal Church of St. Michael and St. George, St. Louis, Missouri, December 2-3.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Felix Theonugraha  
President and Professor of Educational Leadership  
Western Theological Seminary