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.

WTS has much for which to give thanks this academic year. We remain deeply grateful for our longstanding affiliation with the Reformed Church in America and consider it a privilege to participate in the formation of both ministerial and lay leaders for Christ's church.

At present, the seminary is experiencing a season of encouraging momentum. Enrollment is growing, our financial position continues to strengthen, and we are attracting outstanding students and faculty. Across the campus community there is also a palpable sense of hope and goodwill. As Dr. David Stubbs, who serves as faculty liaison to the board of trustees, observes:

> We are going through a very healthy time at our seminary. All the faculty emails I received had a positive feel to them…Some of the positive aspects of our life together that faculty named include our solid finances, positive enrollment numbers, and the morale of our students. At the start of our Spring semester, several faculty members noted how their students are quite "eager to learn and engage," and that there is a general good feeling within our community.

Rev. Dr. Katlyn DeVries, the staff liaison to the board of trustees, adds, "The fall semester was filled with energy and possibility as many staff members and departments settled into new or adjusted roles. We begin this semester with enthusiasm."

Enrollment continues to grow, with strong indications that this momentum will persist as the master of arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program matures. The program remains on track to graduate its inaugural cohort in May 2027 and to apply for accreditation from Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), in addition to its accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools, which would allow graduates to seek licensure across the United States.

The doctor of ministry program also continues to grow. In the coming academic year, we plan to launch eight innovative doctor of ministry cohorts. Rev. Dr. Chuck DeGroat has served faithfully as interim director of the program for the past five years, and WTS is deeply appreciative of his steady and effective leadership.

Below please find a selection of institutional highlights for the past year.

- **Total enrollment** for the fall 2025 semester was 431 students, two shy of the record high of 433 in fall 2022. Total enrollment for the spring 2026 semester

is 426 students, which is a record high for a spring semester. The in-residence master of divinity program has grown by ten percent over the past two years. The total in-residence population has also been bolstered by the increasing number of counseling students, whose program is fully residential.

- The second cohort of the **master of arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling** students launched with 18 students, bringing the total number of students to 35. The accelerated BA/MDiv **Vita Scholars** program has grown to 16 students. The first four students from the program will graduate in June 2026. The **Hope–Western Prison Education Program** graduated its first cohort over the summer and enrolled its fifth cohort this past August.

- The "Cultivating Our Call" capital campaign has raised $11.7 million in cash and nearly $8 million in estate commitments. WTS gives thanks for God's wonderful provisions and the generous support of our donors, partners, and friends.

- WTS concluded the 2024-2025 fiscal year with a surplus for the second year in a row. The fiscal year also ended with a nearly $5 million increase in net assets. The seminary's investment portfolio, managed by Merrill Lynch, posted a 12.9 percent net return for the fiscal year. Additionally, the draw on endowment has been reduced (4.06 percent) for a seventh consecutive year (5.2 percent in fiscal year 2019) and will reach the endowment draw target rate of 4.0 percent in 2026–2027. Finally, the seminary continues to be debt free and has been debt free for the past 24 months.

- The third annual Doxology Gathering took place from October 6-8, 2025. This year's gathering was again fully attended, with more than 300 participants. The evening session with Pulitzer Prize–winning, bestselling author Marilynne Robinson (author of *Gilead*) was attended by nearly 350 people. The Peterson Center decided to increase the number of attendees this year, pushing the maximum limits of many of the spaces that were in use.

New Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs

WTS is pleased to share that **Dr. Keith Starkenburg** has accepted the offer to serve as the next dean and vice president of academic affairs at Western Theological Seminary. Dr. Starkenburg is a graduate of Northwestern College and Western Theological Seminary ('02) and earned his PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Virginia. He served on the faculty at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois, from 2008 to 2022 before coming to WTS, where he directed the Vita Scholars Program and served as the primary liaison in developing partnerships with several external organizations such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

Over this past year, Dr. Starkenburg has served faithfully and effectively as interim dean and vice president of academic affairs, working diligently to build trust with the faculty and to restore a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among faculty and staff. He has also overseen several recent staff hires, all of whom have proven to be

strong and valuable additions to the team. He was unanimously recommended by the search committee as the sole finalist for the dean's role and received enthusiastic support from all who interacted with him.

Lifelong Formation

Lifelong Formation has been part of Western Theological Seminary for decades, appearing under various titles and expressed through a range of priorities and activities. In the 1983–84 academic year, WTS offered twelve continuing education events, building on a lecture-based model that had developed in the 1950s. In 1987, the M. E. Osterhaven Lecture Series was established, accompanied by an expanded commitment to serving the broader church. By 1994, under the leadership of then-president Rev. Dr. Dennis Voskuil, a continuing education advisory committee began experimenting with additional forms of engagement with the church, including workshops, conferences, travel-study seminars, evening courses, certificate programs for laity, and distance learning opportunities.

As part of the 2000 strategic plan, professors George R. Hunsberger, Sonja Stewart, George Brown, and Dean of the Faculty Tom Boogaart advanced an initiative to strengthen the role of the WTS faculty as theological mentors for the church. This vision was expressed through several initiatives, including the annual 1-3-5 Gatherings—opportunities for WTS alumni to reconnect with the seminary one, three, and five years after graduation—along with Journey Groups, training events, and ongoing programs such as the Bast Preaching Festival.

Throughout its history, Western Theological Seminary has sought to steward its theological expertise and institutional resources in service of the church. Various initiatives have been imagined, tested, refined, and, when necessary, discontinued or redirected. In the summer of 2025, supported in part by the Thriving Congregations Scaling Grant from the Lilly Endowment, WTS began a new phase in the development of Lifelong Formation. Current priorities include building a platform that increases accessibility and awareness of available resources, developing low-barrier courses that place WTS faculty in conversation with ministry practitioners, and strengthening institutional partnerships that expand the seminary's reach and impact.

By the summer of 2026, the following resources are anticipated to be available for the benefit of the local church.

- A series on inclusive worship by Rev. Dr. Sue Rozeboom, created through the Nurturing Children in Worship grant.
- A series on pastoral care with Rev. Dr. Chuck DeGroat, Rev. Dr. Sue Rozeboom, Dr. Suzanne McDonald, and Rev. Dr. J. Todd Billings.
- An accompaniment series for *Generously Reformed* with Rev. Dr. J. Todd Billings, Dr. Suzanne McDonald, and Dr. Alberto La Rosa.
- An online deacon and elder training in collaboration with Rev. Stephen Shaffer.

Generously Reformed

On February 10, 2026, the book project *Generously Reformed: Theology Rooted Deep and Reaching Wide*, written by Rev. Dr. J. Todd Billings, Dr. Suzanne McDonald, and Dr. Alberto La Rosa, will be released. The book attempts to articulate what it means to be Reformed in the 21st century, attempting to answer both key misconceptions about Reformed theology as well as showing the breadth of the Reformed tradition. This book promises to be another worthwhile and helpful publication for the church by our faculty.

Hispanic Ministry Program

In January, WTS was invited to participate in a consultation convened by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH). WTS was invited to attend alongside our partner institution in Puerto Rico, Educando Creyentes Hacemos Ministros (ECHAM). During the consultation, it became clear that the partnership between WTS and ECHAM is distinctive within the broader landscape of theological education. Indeed, ATS and AETH convened this gathering specifically to hear our story, learn from our experience, and develop a case study that they hope will serve as a model for other ATS-accredited schools.

The context of ECHAM reflects a common pattern in Latin America. As an unaccredited Bible institute, the most prevalent form of theological education in the region, ECHAM prepares many graduates who are actively serving as pastors. However, when these graduates seek advanced theological education, U.S.-based seminaries often face challenges in assessing their academic readiness for master's-level study due to the absence of formal accreditation.

AETH was founded in the mid-1990s by Dr. Justo González, a renowned Cuban theologian. In recent years, AETH has developed a certification process for Bible institutes, enabling graduates of these institutions to pursue further study more readily at ATS-accredited seminaries. To date, 12 Bible institutes have been certified through this process, including ECHAM.

Western's partnership with ECHAM began in the fall of 2019, when ECHAM's president, Danny Santiago, visited our campus at Western's invitation. Following sustained conversation, WTS and ECHAM entered into a three-year Memorandum of Understanding that allowed up to 12 credit hours of ECHAM coursework to be applied toward Western's master of arts degree. In return, ECHAM agreed to allow WTS to recruit from among its students and graduates. This agreement was renewed for an additional four years in 2025. In parallel, WTS launched a Spanish-language doctor of ministry cohort specifically tailored to the needs of theological education in Latin America. Seventeen ECHAM graduates are currently enrolled in this cohort, and upon completion of the program, these graduates will begin teaching at ECHAM.

Stated plainly, WTS is playing an active and strategic role in the preparation of future theological educators and professors for Latin America.

Finally, ATS highlighted one particular aspect of this partnership as especially commendable: the mutual willingness of both institutions to adapt. ECHAM has aligned itself with the academic procedures, processes, and timelines of WTS, while WTS has adapted to serving students shaped by different cultural values and approaches to administrative engagement. Although these adaptations required intentional flexibility on both sides, each institution affirmed that it has been able to retain its core identity and character. ATS identified this dynamic as a noteworthy strength of the partnership.

Retirements

Dr. John Brogan, dean of faculty at WTS, has announced his plans to retire at the end of this academic year.

After serving at our sister institution Northwestern College from 1997 to 2013 (eight years as a faculty member and eight years as vice president for student development/dean of student life), John was hired at WTS in 2013 as dean of formation, joining the faculty the same year as Drs. Ben Conner, Chuck DeGroat, and Kristen Johnson.

In 2014, Dr. Brogan took on a new role as associate dean and served in that role for ten years. In this past year, Dr. Brogan has served as dean of faculty.

In his role as associate dean, Dr. Brogan also taught a number of classes in the Biblical Field, along with leading intercultural immersion courses. He has also taught as an adjunct in the Hope–Western Prison Education Program. Dr. Brogan said that he has grown as a teacher at Western, noting that one of "the biggest pedagogical shifts was adjusting my teaching of Greek and New Testament with ministry in mind."

Dr. Brogan has taken on many responsibilities at Western over the years, which led President Emeritus Rev. Dr. Tim Brown to introduce Dr. Brogan as "Western's utility player"—a baseball reference to a player who was asked to play any position on the field. Some of these responsibilities included serving as an ad-hoc registrar, leading the ATS reaccreditation self-study task force and writing the decennial self-study report, serving as Title IX coordinator and deputy coordinator, serving as Biblical Field chair for several years, and serving as interim dean.

As for his future plans, Dr. Brogan has provided this description with his characteristic humor:

> Kathy and I don't have any specific plans for retirement at this time. We hope to travel more to make everyone jealous. We are excited to visit and torment our children and spoil our grandchildren in Iowa and Tennessee more frequently. I also plan to enroll in every class taught by my former colleagues as an auditor, to ask numerous inane and irrelevant questions in class, and to give extremely low scores on course evaluations to "bring down the curve." I hope to be hired as one of David Becker's summer crew and then complain

> about the heat and hard work. I also plan on writing inane and irrelevant daily emails to Felix and/or Keith with suggestions for improvement. Finally, since I know the rhythms and inner workings of every office in the seminary, I promise to stop by every office unexpectedly at your busiest times just to hang out and shoot the breeze.

Cherri Westhouse has also announced her plan to retire at the end of this academic year. Cherri joined WTS in August 2014 and served at the front desk as an administrative assistant for the institution. In the fall of 2015, she expanded her ministry by assisting Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra and supporting Western's chapel program with warmth, hospitality, and a deep love for worship. By 2017, Cherri's role broadened once again as she began partnering with the President's Office and several departments to coordinate events—work she carried out with grace, excellence, and an unwavering spirit of service.

Throughout her time here, Cherri also contributed her gifts to several committees, including the Worship Committee, Employee Engagement, MELD–Personnel Team, the Graduate Certificate for Disability and Ministry Committee, the Diversity Committee, and the Staff Council. In each setting, she brought a Christ-centered heart for the community.

As she looks ahead to retirement, Cherri shares:

> My retirement plans are to spend as much time as I can with my brothers' families and the many nieces and nephews. They are all a rich blessing to me. I also look forward to spending time with the amazing friends I have, near and far.

While we will deeply miss her presence, we send her with our prayers, asking that God bless her with rest, joy, and the rich companionship of loved ones.

New Faculty Hires

WTS is pleased to share the news of two new additions to the faculty.

Dr. Pauline Buisch will serve as the assistant professor of Old Testament. She is a graduate of New York University (BA), Redeemer Seminary (MDiv), and earned her PhD from the University of Notre Dame (2021). She previously taught at United Theological Seminary and her research focuses on the literary intersections between the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, inner-biblical allusion, and early Jewish interpretation. She is married to Jonathan Buisch, who is an ordained minister, and they have three young children.

Dr. Hanny Wuysang will serve as the assistant professor of Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She is a graduate of Wheaton College (MA) and earned her PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision from Western Michigan University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Wuysang has also served as a counselor in Alongside Ministry in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

WTS anticipates hiring another faculty member in New Testament sometime in spring 2026.

Faculty and Staff Celebrations

Rev. Dr. J. Todd Billings has been elected to the American Theological Society. The American Theological Society is the oldest theological society in North America. Membership is by recommendation only, limited to one hundred members, and requires affirmative support from two-thirds of the membership. Members are individuals whose "achievement in the discipline of theology is of sufficient merit to promise significant contributions to the field of theology." The membership roster is a "Who's Who" of North American theologians across the spectrum of theological thought, including Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, James Cone, Cornel West, Carl F. H. Henry, Kathryn Tanner, Katherine Sonderegger, Richard Mouw, Lamin Sanneh, Walter Brueggemann, Timothy George, Willie James Jennings, Amos Yong, Elaine Heath, and many others.

Dr. Winn Collier is knee-deep into his next book with Tyndale, currently titled *Thou Art Lightning and Love: Undone By God's Dangerous Mercy*, and should have a draft turned in by June. He will be leading retreats at Laity Lodge, First Presbyterian Lake Forest, the Three Rivers Collaborative, and Kindred Writers Community. His book on François Fénelon is currently part of Renovaré's annual book club, which has roughly 2,100 participants, their largest ever. He continues with joy to preach at Pillar Chapel and have numerous conversations with churches, pastors, writers, and Christians from every sort of denomination and tradition.

Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst recently spoke at a global ecumenical webinar inaugurating the Season of Creation. As part of INFEMIT (International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation), she co-organized and spoke at the conference "Church at the Crossroads," which was held in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, in September 2025. The conference sought to emphasize the way of Jesus, non-violence, and peacebuilding in contrast with Christian Zionism and theological justifications for violence. Dr. DeBorst concluded an article titled "Nothing New under the Sun? Missiological (Miss-) Encounters at Lausanne 4" for publication in the October issue of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research.

Dr. Ben Conner continues to lead and work with others on the "Nurturing Children with Disabilities" Project. In that work, he is excited to see how parents as well as the children are leaning into their wonder and are experiencing awe and a sense of connection with God and all creation through interacting with horses and each other. He also taught on "Disability and the Kingdom of God" for three Sundays during September and October 2025 at Calvary Reformed Church in Holland.

Rev. Dr. Chuck DeGroat turned in the manuscript for his next book, *Who You're Becoming: The Slow and Courageous Work of Cultivating Character in a Narcissistic Age.* He is speaking at Asbury Seminary in March and will be a keynote and breakout

speaker at the Julie Roys Restore Conference in fall 2026 on healing trauma and cultivating character formation.

Rev. Dr. Han-luen Kantzer Komline is serving as theologian-in-residence at Pillar Church (Holland, Michigan), something that has been very life-giving for her over the past year. She preaches occasionally at Pillar Church and also had the opportunity to review and provide input on options as a new curriculum was selected for children's ministries at Pillar. In the fall, she was interviewed by Jairo Menodoza for his YouTube channel "Cápsulas Teología," and spoke to a class as well as connected with doctoral students at Duke Divinity School.

Rev. Dr. David Komline took on a new role as associate academic dean of the seminary. In October, he traveled with President Theonugraha and board chair Steve Spoelhof to represent the seminary in Uganda. In November, he took a group of students enrolled in his American Evangelicalism class to Washington, DC, to experience the Museum of the Bible. He also led an adult education course at Third Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Dr. Suzanne McDonald gave a two-part adult education series on the person and work of the Holy Spirit for Central Park Reformed/Park Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, and went on a whirlwind trip to England to be the keynote speaker at a history and heritage festival in September, presenting some of the results of her research from her sabbatical. She also presented aspects of her sabbatical research over Zoom to the United Reformed Church (UK)'s History Society. She presented at a workshop on dementia and dementia care at Christ Memorial Church in Holland; led a seven-part adult education series at Fellowship Reformed Church in Holland, walking through the RCA's confessional standards; and offered a three-part series on eschatology for Woodland Church in Grand Rapids. In November, she presented a two-part series on "Dealing Faithfully with Dementia" for Alger Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra, in his role as director of church partnerships for A Rocha, led a kick-off event at WTS on September 13, 2025, for the Churches of Restoration Initiative. It was encouraging to see so many churches in West Michigan eager to put creation care in the center of their discipleship efforts and to be introduced to WTS during this day of worship, fellowship, planning, and learning. He also traveled to Brazil in November to participate in COP30. It was a deeply formative trip for him, solidifying and modifying many of his convictions about Christians and creation care. He enjoyed a wonderful three-day song-writing workshop with Wendell Kimbrough and others, exploring the significance of the Psalms for spiritual growth. He and his wife, Deb Rienstra, are finishing up the manuscript for *Refugia Church* this spring and have already received some excellent feedback from trusted climate leaders.

Dr. David Stubbs continues to give presentations to churches and organizations about the work and impact of the Hope–Western Prison Education Program. Most recently, such presentations include appearing on the "Prosper Podcast" of the Ciocca Center for Principled Entrepreneurship of the Catholic University of America,

the Holland Area Senior Professionals, and academic departments and classes at Hope College. He was also invited to be part of a group of 12 international scholars (mainly Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) who will spend a week together in Oxford, England, this April in order to work on and publish a scholarly book and a subsequent book intended for congregations on the relationship between the Last Supper and the Lord's Supper. He just finished a two-week course at First Reformed Church in Grandville on "Restorative Justice and the Hope–Western Prison Education Program."

Rev. Dr. Travis West's book, *The Sabbath Way*, has been well-received, and he has several opportunities to preach, speak, and teach on Sabbath in relation to the book, including teaching adult ed classes on Sabbath at First Reformed in Holland, Third Reformed in Holland, Second Reformed in Zeeland, and Hope Church in Holland this fall. He will be preaching at First Presbyterian in Muskegon, First Reformed in Holland, Hope Church in Holland, and Second Congregational in Grand Rapids, and will teach a two-day class on Sabbath for the Lay School of Theology in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in November. He will be the keynote presenter of the Sabbath Symposium in Washington, DC, sponsored by Rising Day Ministries and Leland Seminary in December.

Rev. Dr. Katlyn DeVries led Zeeland Classis through a successful vote to merge with Great Lakes City Classis in October 2025. On January 25, she preached at Zion Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan. She continues to serve as the moderator of the RCA's Commission on History, where she is currently working with denominational staff to plan for the 400th anniversary of the RCA, to be marked in 2028.

Rev. Dr. Pam Bush, in collaboration with Sara Zallar and Ann McKnight, led a three-day formation "retreat" for incarcerated first-year students at the Muskegon Correctional Facility. The Hope–Western Prison Education Program freshmen and upperclassmen volunteer facilitators were overall very invested and enthusiastic. Multiple students commented on their sense of the presence of the Spirit as they engaged with each other in community. Thanks be to God!

Approval of Substitution for 24-Month Requirement

The Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary granted a substitution for the 24-month requirement for Marcus Dreffen in response to a petition submitted by the Classis of Montgomery (*BCO* Chapter 1, Part II, Article 11, Section 3 [2025 edition, p. 43]).

General Synod Professor Recommendation

As a theological agent of the Reformed Church in America, it is a privilege of the seminary to recommend faculty members to the office of General Synod Professor. Therefore, the Board of Trustees of Western Theological Seminary offers the following recommendation to appoint Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra to the office of General Synod Professor.

TE 26-3
Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra, Professor of Preaching and Worship Arts at Western Theological Seminary, graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor's degree in philosophy, then went on to receive a master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a PhD in Theology with a concentration in Christian worship and a minor in homiletics from Fuller Theological Seminary; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra was ordained as a minister of Word and sacrament by the Classis of Holland in 1993 and has served as a chaplain at Central College (1992-1996) and Calvin University (1998-2004); and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra then served at Western Theological Seminary from 2009 to the present, teaching foundational courses in liturgy and homiletics and electives such as "The Church's Common Chord: Church Music in a Fragmented Age" and "Liturgical Shenanigans: Ritual Theory and Christian Formation," as well as leading a doctor of ministry cohort, "Refugia Faith: Preparing the Church for Sustainability and Crisis Resilience"; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra also served as the Director of Worship Life at Western Theological Seminary, overseeing daily worship in Mulder Chapel; assisting faculty, staff, and students who are leading worship; composing liturgical music that complements the season; and overseeing the renovation of the Mulder Chapel in 2011-2012; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra has contributed to the formation of ordained ministers of Word and sacrament in the Reformed Church in America by shaping the worship, preaching, and liturgical imagination and practices of students at Western Theological Seminary and through the Ministerial Formation Certification Agency; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra continues to contribute to the vibrancy of the local church by regularly serving as liturgical

consultant, interim minister of preaching and worship, and pulpit supply; and,

Whereas the Reformed Church in America has been blessed by Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra's service to the denomination, including as the project coordinator of the RCA Worship Renewal Task Force from 2009 to 2012, as a member of the Commission on Christian Worship from 2010 to 2016 and again from 2022 to 2025, and as moderator of that same commission from 2014 to 2016; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra continues to publish books, articles, and chapters that deepen and extend the academic study of worship, liturgy, and the church; and,

Whereas Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra contributes to raising awareness and engagement regarding the importance of creation care among local churches through his service with A Rocha USA, a global family of conservation organizations working together to live out God's calling to care for creation and equip others to do likewise;

Therefore, be it resolved that the 219th regular session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, from June 11 to 16, 2026, declares the Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra a General Synod professor.