

Report of the Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries To the Synods of Regions 7, 8 and 9 Spring, 2016

In 1995 the three East Coast ELCA seminaries (LTSG, LTSP, and LTSS) joined in the establishment of the Eastern Cluster of Lutheran Seminaries (ECLS). Since that time, ECLS has fostered strong collaboration between the three eastern schools and other partners, enhancing our common task of theological education for a broad spectrum of students and lifelong learners. In these challenging times when all seminaries seek new approaches to forming leaders for the Church, we are increasingly engaged with the other ELCA seminaries, our regional synods and additional partners in the search for financial sustainability and programmatic flexibility.

A separately incorporated entity, the Cluster is governed by a Board of Directors made up of board chairs and other officers from each of the three schools. One of the three seminary presidents serves in rotation as Cluster executive director. This position is currently filled by Provost Clay Schmit of LTSS. (Since the merger of LTSS with Lenoir-Rhyne University in 2012, the head of LTSS has served under the title of seminary provost.) ECLS continues on with only modest core funding from the seminaries. One of the key partnerships that has made the work of the Cluster flourish has been the reception of over \$6 million in grants from foundations to support common projects and subsidize seminary budgets.

Current Collaborative Programs

- The Cluster's *One Library Under Three Roofs* links the collections at Gettysburg, Philadelphia and Columbia, providing students, faculty and other borrowers with access to a vast array of books, periodicals and e-resources.
- Through the Cluster-sponsored *Project Connect*, hundreds of young persons have been invited to "consider their callings" over the past half-dozen years. While funding from the Lilly Endowment has now been fully expended, Admissions staffs at the three schools continue aspects fostered by Project Connect. The Cluster is working with a grant researcher who will help to identify potential partners for future work.
- The *Abundant Life Grant* was received this past year from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Totaling \$750,000, this grant enables each school to engage in research on the subject of seminarian indebtedness and explore means by which to reduce graduate debt.

Moving beyond the collaboration between LTSP and LTSG in past years, these two members of the Eastern Cluster have committed to the development of a new partnership which would join the two schools as one institution with two campuses. This new venture will come into effect in 2017. The boards, faculties, and administrations are currently engaged in designing the shape of this new school, making hard decisions about governance, faculty size and make-up, and curricula.

Future Cluster Directions: Given the merger of LTSS with Lenoir-Rhyne University, and in light of the new venture between LTSG and LTSP, the board of the Eastern Cluster will now begin to consider the best way for the strong collaborative work of the Cluster to continue under the new configuration of schools. Alongside the work that the Cluster schools are doing together, there is a renewed commitment by all eight ELCA seminaries to find ways to work effectively together. This has been prompted by the work of the ELCA's Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) which has encouraged the broad cooperation of the ELCA's theological network. One of the principle results of this work has been a proposal by which the eight schools can collaborate and share resources across a digital learning exchange platform. A successful venture of this kind would benefit all synods and the entire ELCA by making theological education more accessible to leaders of many kinds. This initiative is in the early stages of development.

With Appreciation: The Cluster is grateful for support to theological education and our seminaries from our partner synods and churchwide organization.

The Rev. Dr. Bill Trexler, Cluster Board Chair
The Rev. Dr. Clay Schmit, Cluster Executive Director