

SERVING THE PROMISE OF OUR MISSION: LEADERSHIP AT LUTHER SEMINARY

SHEILA STROBEL SMITH

Luther Seminary and its predecessor institutions have provided quality theological education in the Upper Midwest since 1869. Currently located in St. Paul, Minnesota, Luther Seminary is the largest of the eight seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) in the United States.¹ More than one third of the ELCA's newly ordained clergy, and increasing numbers of its lay professionals, are educated at Luther Seminary. Though the majority of students are affiliated with the ELCA, Luther Seminary welcomes students from all denominational traditions. In 2004, nineteen percent of the student body represented thirty religious traditions including such diversity as Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Assembly of God, and Moravian.

The seminary has an interesting theological and organizational history which includes a complicated series of mergers of Lutheran denominational streams and their seminaries.² The most recent merger occurred in 1982, when Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary was formed from two seminaries - Luther Seminary of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and Northwestern Lutheran Seminary of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). This occurred six years prior to the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), at which time the school became one of the eight seminaries for the new denomination. It was formed through the merger of three national bodies, The American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America. The name Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary was changed to Luther Seminary in 1994.

¹ Luther's total enrollment in September 2005 was 819 students including 633 full-time and 186 part-time. They were enrolled in the following degree programs: 49% - Master of Divinity; 24% - Ph.D., Master of Theology or Doctor of Ministry; 23% Master of Arts; and 4% - Non-degree. For more quick facts about Luther Seminary, go to <http://www.luthersem.edu/quickfacts.asp?m=535>. For more information on the ELCA seminaries, go to <http://www.elca.org/theologicaleducation/>.

² A detailed history of Luther Seminary may be accessed at http://www.luthersem.edu/why_luther/history.asp?m=447.

Given its history, it is not surprising that a dominant theme at Luther Seminary is leadership. The commitment to leaders and leadership is embodied in a ministry of word and sacrament. The importance of leadership is reflected in key documents such as the vision statement, mission statement, curriculum, and the 2000-2005 strategic plan, as well as in the practices of the faculty, administration, and board. The key understanding is that, through the integration of theology, theory, and strategic action, students are best prepared for service in the world.

The Luther Seminary community understands that being or becoming a leader is not easy. Much energy and effort has been focused over the years on this issue. The purpose of this essay is to capture the essence of Luther Seminary's commitment and approach to educating leaders. The first section of this essay provides an historical perspective of several strategic decisions that demonstrate the seminary's commitment to leadership. The impact of these decisions is discussed in the second section, through a brief review of several new strategic initiatives.

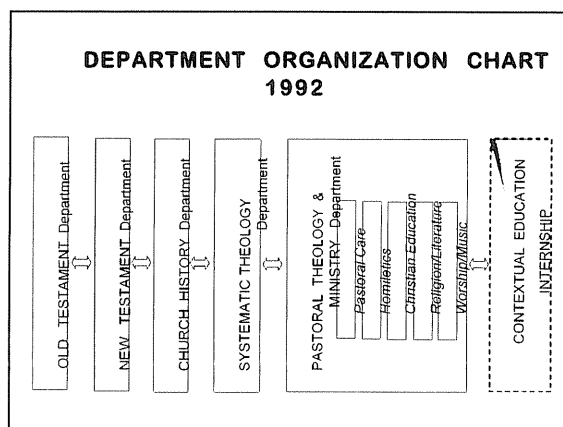
COMMITMENT AND CAPACITY

The commitment to the education of leaders at Luther Seminary is more than words on a page. It is continually demonstrated through the decisions and actions of the faculty, students, administration, and board, in order to engage the changing world that the church now seeks to serve. Luther Seminary focuses on leadership at all levels through communal discernment and strategic planning. The focus on leadership continued to evolve under the guidance of Luther Seminary's president, Dr. David L. Tiede who served from 1987 to 2005. Beginning with the creation of the 1989 strategic plan, several critical decisions were made and implemented during his tenure. These include: (a) reorganization of the academic departments; (b) revision of the curriculum and the development of a curricular strategy; (c) adoption of a new mission statement; and (d) the successful development and implementation of the 2000-2005 strategic plan.

REORGANIZATION OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

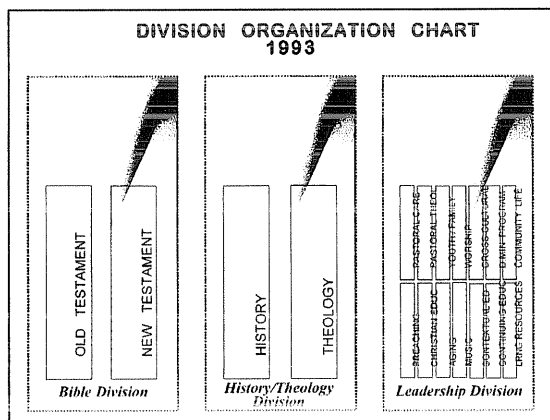
Historically, the academic organization at Luther Seminary was structured around departments. It became apparent in the early 1990s that the existing curriculum needed to be revised in order to more accurately reflect changes in congregations and communities, as well as among the faculty and students. During the conversations about a new curricular strategy, the existing academic organizational structure was also discussed and subsequently changed.

The following chart illustrates the structure by academic departments that existed prior to the early 1990s. Each department functioned separately from the others, as if they were silos. A shared curricular strategy did not exist; the contributions of each department were neither integrated nor coordinated with one another.



In particular, pastoral theology was a separate department. Contextual education and the internship year tended to be independent of the rest of the organization. The focus was on preparing pastors as preachers and caregivers, with little attention being given to the importance of context, community, and mission. Ultimately, each student was responsible for integrating what was learned from each department through their contextual experiences.

After several years of planning and financial support from the Lilly Foundation, the academic department structure was reorganized in 1993. The new organizational structure included three divisions: the Bible Division, which includes the Old and New Testament departments; the History and Theology Division, which includes Church History and Systematic Theology; and the new Leadership Division.



The creation of the Leadership Division indicated a new imagination for practical theology as being a theological activity, and not just a series of *arts of ministry*. This was inspired by a new literature in theological education that emerged at the time, drawing especially on the writings of Don Browning and Edward Farley.³ The original intent was to dissolve the Scheiermacherian divide between theory and practice that had been fostered by Enlightenment thinking, and to do so by integrating theology and theory with practice.⁴ The chart indicates the wide variety of academic disciplines that were included in the new division—

3 Don S. Browning, *Practical Theology*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983); Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983).

4 For a brief explanation of Scheiermacher's position, refer to Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 22-28.

preaching; worship; music; pastoral theology; and Christian education, in addition to specialties such as youth and family ministry; ministry to the aging; and cross-cultural ministry. The innovative inclusion of contextual education, continuing education, learning resources, and community life provided the capacity for re-imagining leadership from a contextual perspective. , However, the lack of adequate theological and theoretical foundations for achieving this innovation soon became evident. Complicating this mix of disciplines was the inclusion of a number of administrative roles, such as the Dean of Students and the directors of contextual education, continuing education, and cross-cultural education.

The intended integration proved somewhat difficult to achieve. Using the word *leadership* in the division name was a bold move, but it was laden with ambiguity. From the beginning, the Leadership Division struggled to live into the possibilities envisioned in its new name, both within its own work and in relation to that of the two other divisions. In fairness, it must be noted that this was, and still is, new territory for theological education. Few seminaries have attempted such an ambitious change. Undaunted, the Leadership Division continues on its journey to resolve the fundamental question, "What is leadership?" Over the past few years, the division has been engaging in an intensive process of trying to create an integrated theological and theoretical understanding of its work. One significant result of this process was the application of the word "leadership" to a number of faculty positions, including: Professor of Educational Leadership, Professor of Congregational Care Leadership, and Professor of Congregational Leadership. This change continues to broaden the imagination about leadership in the shared work among the members of the division.

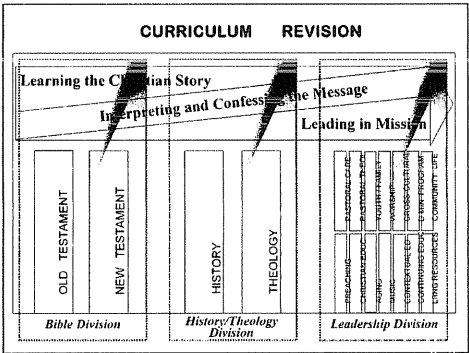
Luther Seminary's innovative organizational structure was

designed to foster integration across divisions. Such integration is sought through interdisciplinary teaching teams, who develop and share responsibility for course content. Despite the struggles, the new structure has provided an excellent foundation for subsequent initiatives, beginning with a new curricular design.

CURRICULAR STRATEGY

The new organizational structure helped to facilitate the development and implementation of a new curricular strategy, designed to be shared by all divisions. The entire curriculum was reframed in 1993, to focus on the formation of leaders and their participation in leading Christian communities to participate in God’s mission in the world. As with the new organizational structure, the concept of a shared curricular strategy was innovative and unique for a seminary.

The new curriculum is based upon three interrelated movements: *Learning the Story*; *Interpreting and Confessing the Message*; and *Leading in Mission*. The intent is to prepare leaders to know the Christian story; understand how to interpret and confess the Christian faith in varied contexts; and to lead Christian communities in mission in those contexts. As illustrated in the chart, all three divisions share responsibility for all three movements of the curriculum. In addition, all three movements are integrated across the entire curriculum, as well as into each course taught at Luther Seminary. All faculty members are responsible for integrating their individual courses with the curricular strategy and for teaching all three movements within their courses.



The shared curricular strategy was designed so that *Learning the Christian Story* receives more emphasis in the beginning of each academic program and *Leading in Mission* is emphasized more at the end. *Interpreting and Confessing the Message* is incorporated across the curriculum. A fourth movement, Living as a Disciple, was originally envisioned but not implemented until being reintroduced into the curriculum through the 2000-2005 strategic plan.

The most unique component of the curricular strategy is the *Interpreting and Confessing the Message* movement. This movement cuts across the curriculum and each course. It is based upon the assumption that God is up to something in the world, in local communities, in congregations, and in individual lives. In other words, God is understood to be alive and active in the multitude of contexts. Further, it is understood that God is calling persons to participate with God in these contexts. To that end, the intent of the *Interpreting and Confessing the Message* movement is designed to teach students to critically reflect on, interpret, and integrate what they are learning in the classroom into ministry within particular contexts.

A series of *Interpreting and Confessing* (IC) courses is co-taught by teams of professors representing two of the divisions. This approach provides the students with the opportunity to engage multiple perspectives on the same topic. The foundation for the *Interpreting and Confessing* curricular movement included the development of two new courses - Reading the Audiences and Exercises in Biblical Theology. Other courses in the IC curriculum include: Worship; Lutheran Confessional Writings (or an equivalent polity course for other denominations); Truth and Meaning: A Rhetorical Approach; Theology and Spirituality in Christian Ministry; and God, Evil, and Suffering.

Reading the Audiences and *Exercises in Biblical Theology* serve as bookends for the entire curriculum. Though the content, texts, and teaching approach have evolved over time, the importance of these two courses within the curricular strategy has not changed.⁵ Both courses rightfully have earned

⁵ A variety of texts have been utilized in these two courses over the years. Appendix A includes a list of some of the resources currently used in these two courses.

the reputation for being physically, emotionally, intellectually, theologically, and spiritually challenging. Students frequently complain about the excessive workload and high expectations for their participation as individuals and in teams. Faculty members patiently labor alongside the students throughout the process, knowing that ultimately most students are transformed by the experience.

Reading the Audiences

Reading the Audiences (IC1615) sets up the curricular strategy at Luther Seminary. This course is required of all MDiv and most MA students, and is intended to be taken during in the first year. It is taught by a team of professors, one each from the Leadership Division and History/Theology Division. According to the Fall 2005 syllabus:

The goal of this course is to help students (re)imagine what it means to be a missional leader...within a church that has been called into mission...within the context of God's world...which is good but broken, and in the midst of profound change...by engaging students, at the very beginning of their seminary experience, in a conversation about some of the most critical questions being asked in the church today: *What in the world is God up to? What is God up to in our communities? What is God up to in our congregations? What is God up to in my life?*

This course focuses on developing and strengthening knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This is accomplished through reading, lectures, class participation, group projects, presentations, and written exams. Fifty percent of the final grade depends on the group project. Teams of three-to-five students are asked to imagine that they are members of a Vision Team selected by an actual congregation. They are responsible for gathering data on the congregation and the local community for use in the congregation's strategic planning process. After extensive research and analysis, the team summarizes its findings into a presentation which addresses three questions: *How does this congregation see itself today? What is God up to in this community? What might God be calling this congregation to be and do?* Each team

presents its findings to the actual leaders of the congregation they have studied. In addition, each student writes a five-page reflection paper on the entire process, including a paragraph on the gifts and contributions of each member of the team.

Exercises in Biblical Theology

Exercises in Biblical Theology (IC3610) summarizes the curricular strategy, with an emphasis on *leading in mission*. This course is intended to serve as a capstone course for MDiv students during their final year of study. The focus is on integrating biblical theology with an imagination for leading in mission. It is taught by a team of professors, one each from the Leadership Division and Bible Division. According to the Fall 2005 syllabus, several of the course objectives included the following:

- o Develop capacity of students to utilize the Bible through exercises in biblical theology to address real life ministry issues through fostering their biblical imagination.
- o Develop capacity of students for leading in mission in relation to congregations and their context through fostering their leadership identity.

These objectives are accomplished by emphasizing shared learning through peer interaction and group projects. Lectures and assigned readings frame the course content. As teams, students are introduced to and engage critical issues for leading in mission, through the use of case studies on several different congregations. In response to the issues encountered in these case studies, each team is expected to apply the assigned readings, identify and utilize additional resources, engage in biblical exegesis, and reflect on previous ministry experience. Students are encouraged to refine their theological imagination by asking the following questions - *What is God doing? What does God want to do?* Each team summarizes its findings and communicates its recommendations in a presentation to its classmates and professors.

The final project in this course requires students to write an essay explaining how they will lead in Christian mission.

Each student is to imagine that they are being considered for a first call as a pastor in a particular congregation. The student is to respond to the following questions from the congregation. How you will lead this community in God's mission? *How should the Bible be interpreted and function in the life of a congregation as it participates in God's mission? What are your theory and practice of leadership in relation to Christian ministry?*

The purpose of this assignment is to help students develop, in a professional and personal manner, their own approach to bringing together biblical imagination with leading in mission. The essay must address the role of the Bible in two ways. It must explain, one, how the Bible functions as a source and norm for the theological work of Christian communities. It also must address how the Bible is as an active agent in those communities' efforts to understand themselves and their participation in God's mission. To these ends, the students clarify their own leadership identity in relation to their vocational call. They also discuss their own gifts, skills, leadership style, and conflict style-all developed within an understanding of the missional church. Each student must respond to this question: *How will you, as a leader of a Christian community, guide your congregation through scripture as a foundational part of the church's ministry?*

As with the innovative organizational structure, the full potential of Luther Seminary's current curricular strategy has yet to be realized. Though much progress has been made, there is still a need for improving the integration of particular courses within the overall curriculum. To this end, attention has been given in the past several years to the development of an outcome-based assessment process. The journey to reach the ideal continues.

MISSION STATEMENT

After the new organizational structure and the curricular revision were implemented, the Luther Seminary community reviewed the existing mission statement. The result was a new mission statement, which was adopted in December 1994. The new mission statement simply and boldly proclaims why Luther Seminary exists, and it provides the foundation for all strategic decision making. This statement conveys the shared

discernment of God's call for the Luther Seminary community to *educate leaders*, not just pastors, to serve in God's world—through the integration of theology, theory, and strategic action. It is intentionally Trinitarian and “dynamic in character—a living statement that continues to breathe life into our work.”⁶

Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities

- + called and sent by the Holy Spirit
- + to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ
- + and to serve in God's world.

In 2004, the mission statement served as the primary benchmark for the decennial self-study process required for receiving reaffirmation of accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and The Higher Learning Commission (NCA). The Self-Study Report indicated that during the past ten years, the mission statement “has become more and more a central and driving force in all of the activities that comprise and characterize this institution.”⁷ As such, the mission statement “continues to call us to focus on those communities in mission who send us students and receive our graduates.”⁸

Strategic Planning: Serving the Promise of Our Mission

The mission statement became the impetus and focus for the next round of strategic planning which began in 1997. This process included discerning a new, shared vision for Luther Seminary based upon the question “*What is God's preferred future for this community at this time and in this place?*” The new, formal vision statement identifies what the Luther Seminary community believes that God is calling into become.

⁶ “Serving the Promise of Our Mission: The Luther Seminary Strategic Plan 2000-2005,” (St. Paul, MN: January 6, 2000), 11. The report is available at http://www.luthersem.edu/strategic_plan/default.asp.

⁷ “Luther Seminary Self-Study Report 2004,” (St. Paul, MN: September, 2004), 170. The report is available at <http://www.luthersem.edu/selfstudy2004/SelfStudyReport2004.pdf>.

⁸ Ibid.

By 2005, Luther Seminary is

- + internationally respected as a confessional seminary
- + educating leaders for the church
- + to participate fully in God's Mission
- + in a changing world.

Guided by the mission statement, girded by the curricular strategy, and inspired by the new vision, the faculty-led planning team developed an ambitious 2000-2005 strategic plan. The plan's title - *Serving the Promise of Our Mission* (SPOM) - has become an oft-cited mantra that aptly represents the past, present, and future of Luther Seminary. The power and meaning of these words are palpable. They reflect an intentional and continuing commitment to the mission and vision of the seminary. This commitment is carefully articulated in the strategic plan's opening paragraph, the first sentence of which has become essentially the seminary's functional vision statement.

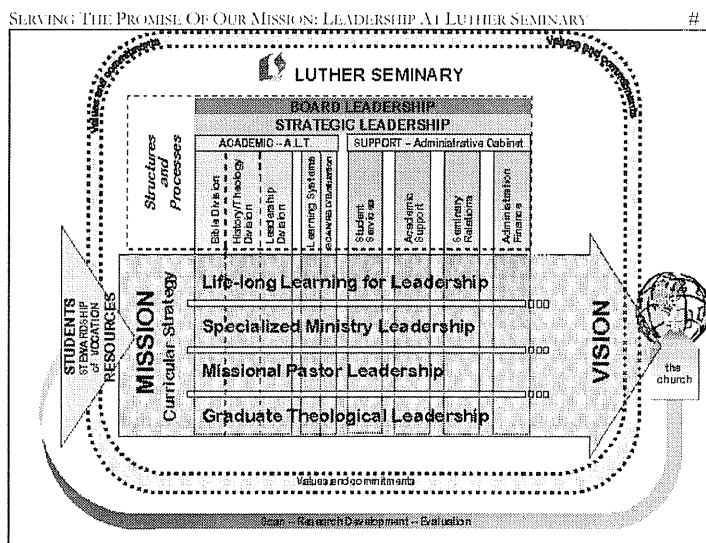
We believe God is calling and sending the church of Jesus Christ into apostolic mission in the 21st century world of many cultures and religions. We understand Luther Seminary itself as a Christian community called and sent to provide a sound and relevant theological education for the leadership that the church needs for our present era of mission. To this end, Luther Seminary understands itself as being on a journey. It is a journey filled with hope, opportunity, and energy, as well as challenge, change and risk. As we make this journey, we seek to draw on the best of our Lutheran confessional heritage and the strengths of our educational tradition.⁹

The momentum created during the planning process continued to swell as the strategic plan was unanimous approved by the faculty on December 15, 1999. Official endorsement by the board quickly followed in January 2000. In addition, the board approved initial funding for the plan and encouraged communication of the plan's benefits to

⁹ *Serving the Promise of our Mission, Luther Seminary Strategic Plan 2000-2005*, p. 7.

donors. A five-year \$96.7 million capital endowment campaign that was focused around the theme “Called and Sent” was initiated in 2001. The campaign approached its goal one year ahead of schedule.

The strategic plan itself calls for the seminary community to develop leaders who are confessional and missional, persons who are prepared to serve in rapidly changing contexts and communities around the world, and particularly in the United States. The key components and functions are summarized in the accompanying chart, which serves as a map for the journey.¹⁰



SPOM specifies four core educational processes through which the mission will be accomplished and the vision realized. By design, these four core educational processes are supported by all academic and administrative structures. These processes include:

- o Lifelong Learning for Leadership - for lay and professional leaders of Christian communities
- o Specialized Minister Leadership - for leaders pursuing a Master of Arts degree or certificate in specialized ministries such as youth and family,

¹⁰ For a detailed explanation of the chart, see “Serving the Promise of Our Mission: The Luther Seminary Strategic Plan 2000-2005,” 7-8.

- church music, aging, and Islamic studies
- o Missional Pastor Leadership - for leaders pursuing a Master of Divinity degree in preparation for ordination as ministers of word and sacrament
- o Graduate Theological Leadership - for leaders pursuing a PhD, DMin, or Master of Theology degree in order to teach or serve in professional leadership positions

As with the other innovations discussed above, the full potential of the four educational processes has yet to be realized. Though associate deans were appointed to lead each core process, these part-time faculty/part-time administrators have struggled to find their place in the new system. In addition, the budget has continued to function around the framework of the former structure, which has tended to reinforce the operation of the educational work within the divisions. It is anticipated that these issues will be discussed as the next strategic plan is prepared in 2006.

New Initiatives

SPOM identified three new strategic initiatives - Congregational Mission and Leadership; Biblical Preaching and Worship; and Life Long Learning. In addition to these new initiatives, the historical emphasis on Children, Youth and Family was reaffirmed in the plan. Following the events on 9/11, a fifth initiative was added - World Christianity and Islam. It was envisioned that concentrations would be developed for all of these initiatives across all of the educational programs - Master of Arts, Master of Divinity, Doctor of Ministry, and Doctor of Philosophy. Though significant progress has been made in all five initiatives, the focus in this essay is on Congregational Mission and Leadership.

Congregational Mission and Leadership

The vision embedded in SPOM invited the development of a concentration that would incorporate a Trinitarian missional theology into the process of the formation of leaders. In 2001, a business plan was developed for the

implementation of graduate programs (DMin and PhD) in Congregational Mission and Leadership (CML). The first cohort of twelve pastors began a five-year course of study toward the CML DMin in July 2002. Two additional cohorts were formed in 2003 and 2005, for a total of 39 participants. A fourth cohort is expected to begin in July 2006. The CML PhD was implemented in 2003 with two students. Currently there are eleven students enrolled in this program with three preparing to write their dissertations.

Both of the CML graduate programs bring the following affirmations into their work:

- **Context matters** - theological education must take context seriously
- **Mission is central** - theological education must be embedded in the logic of the mission of the Triune God to all of creation
- **Christian communities are the focus** - theological education must focus on the life and ministry of Christian communities serving in particular contexts
- **Leadership is essential** - theological education should result in the preparation of persons who are capable of providing leadership for Christian communities.

In the CML program, there is an intentional effort to develop substantive biblical and theological foundations around these themes, while also engaging substantial theoretical perspectives through research and insights from the social sciences. All students in both graduate programs are introduced to social science research methodologies and the use of statistics. Each student is expected to write a thesis incorporating social science research methods and statistics within a theological framing of the research question.

In 2003, the CML strategic initiative was expanded to the MA and MDiv programs. The new position of Professor of Congregational Leadership was created to develop and teach new courses. A CML specialization is now available within the MA program and, through the creative use of available electives, in the MDiv program. Increasing numbers of MDiv students are using this approach to prepare for becoming new church developers after graduation. Students have become so excited about leadership and mission that they have formed

the Fellowship of Leaders in Evangelism Attending Seminary (FLEAS) to help support their work.

All of these CML degree programs have invited deeper theological and theoretical reflection among the faculty and students. Some of the books that foster and sustain this conversation are included in the appendix.

SUMMARY

The commitment to the education of leaders at Luther Seminary is more than words on a page. This essay has illustrated some of the critical and innovative decisions made in recent years that established a firm foundation for the future. Buoyed by the significant results-and in spite of the challenges-Luther Seminary will continue to serve the promise of its mission. It will educate leaders for Christian communities, as God calls and sends the church of Jesus Christ into apostolic mission in the 21st century world of many cultures and religions.

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APPENDIX A

Reading the Audiences and Exercises in Biblical Theology:
Selected Texts

- Bliese, Richard H., and Craig Van Gelder, eds. *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005.
- Collins, James C. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap—and Others Don't*. 1st ed. New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2001.
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APPENDIX B

Congregational Mission and Leadership: Selected Texts

Missional Ecclesiology

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Hermeneutics, Church History, and Missiology

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Missional Organization and Missional Leadership

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