From David J. Lose, LTSP President and Michael Cooper-White, LTSG President

We are writing you jointly as constituents of LTSG and LTSP in order to provide an update on the work to unify these two historic institutions for the sake of the whole Church. Much has been accomplished in the six months since the Boards of the two schools both unanimously voted to enter into a process to form a new venture in theological education, and we are excited to offer this update. We want also to remind you of our reasons for undertaking this significant work and will begin there.

Context
We currently face two challenges that we are trying to address by joining our two wonderful seminaries. The first is a great shortage of pastoral leaders. A recently-released study by the ELCA reported that we currently have 600 unfilled pastoral vacancies and that that number is expected to grow to 1000 over the next four years. In this regard, we have never needed our seminaries more. At the same time, the current ELCA network of seminaries (and theological education across the church) is proving unsustainable, as the eight ELCA schools collectively ran an operating deficit of $70MM over the last decade.

By joining LTSG and LTSP we are striving to equip a new generation of leaders who are responsive to, and able to address, the challenges our congregations are facing in a culture that no longer has a vested interest in congregational health. By combining forces, we will be able to do so in a way that is sustainable for the church and more accessible and affordable for students. Toward that end, we not only project a balanced budget from day one of the new venture, but we are also (a) offering full tuition scholarships to all full time,
residential ELCA candidates for rostered ministry, and matching church-generated scholarships up to 100% for all other students, and (b) starting a Distributed Learning MDiv degree that will enable more students to complete their theological training at a distance.

**Updates**

At respective meetings in April, the Boards of LTSG and LTSP each voted unanimously to move ahead with the process to unify the two schools. They also authorized the creation of a Transition Team made up of twelve persons (six from each school) responsible for creating by-laws and policy handbooks for the unified school; recommending new members of the faculty, staff, and Board; selecting a name; and authorizing a presidential search committee. The Transition Team, chaired by Bishop Jim Dunlop with Pastor Elise Brown serving as vice-chair, met last week and is making significant progress on all these matters.

On Friday, July 15, the Boards of the two schools met jointly on the campus of LTSG to get to know each other better, receive updates on the continued work with the Pennsylvania Department of Education and our accrediting agencies, and to have conversation on the role of the new Board. (The Boards will meet a second time together on the LTSP campus in late August.) While in Gettysburg, the Boards also heard reports from their members and the presidents on the tremendous support received in recent assemblies of the synods of Regions 7 and 8. Several of the synods adopted formal resolutions of support and encouragement, including also expressions of concern for disruption in the lives of current employees. In synod discussions, on the floor, in informational forums, and “around the edges,” most who spoke with trustees and other seminary representatives affirmed the new venture while also offering helpful suggestions and posing thoughtful questions, some of which we could answer and some whose answers are still being sought. We are grateful for the support, candor, trust, and patience as we move this venture forward.

Work with the PA Dept. of Education is going well. It is their counsel that one of the two schools provide the continuing corporate entity for the new venture to guarantee that licensure and accreditation remain intact, and that the other school join this school through merger or, more likely, closure and transfer of assets. At this point, the Transition Team is reviewing a variety of factors to help it discern which school may best play which role. The temptation in all of this will be to name the school that provides the corporate entity as the “winner” and the other school as the “loser.” But it’s vital to see this as a joint effort between two schools with a deeply intertwined past and a shared future. The school that provides the continuing corporate entity, after all, will have a new set of by-laws, a new Board representing Regions 7 and 8 of the ELCA, a new name, and a new president. It will be, for all intents and purposes, a new school. The combined strength of the schools will enable us to create a new venture in theological education hosted on two distinct campuses that better serves the larger church and world.

The Boards also affirmed their strong support of existing and specialized work at both campuses, including the Urban Theological Institute at LTSP, the Town and Country Church Institute at Gettysburg, and the training of candidates in the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries programs that occurs at both schools. The work to unify the two schools will provide more resources to strengthen all of these important commitments.

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Conversations with faculty and staff about how best to support our community are ongoing. Each school has engaged a chaplain to offer spiritual care during this time of transition. Policy handbooks at both schools provide guidelines for transition support for staff. In order to provide a measure of security for faculty, while also creating flexibility for the emerging school to meet its financial and curricular goals, tenured faculty members have been offered a voluntary transitional support package. In exchange for resignations effective July 1, 2017, tenured faculty who accept the offer are guaranteed either a position in the new venture or continuing compensation for a defined period.

The working group on Educational Design and Curriculum Development, composed of the deans and representative faculty of both schools and in conversation with the rest of the LTSG/LTSP faculties, is starting “from the ground up” to create a new curriculum that is responsive to the present demands, challenges, and opportunities of serving the Church in the twenty-first century. By the end of the summer, it expects to submit a report to the Transition Team proposing degrees to be offered at the new school, the broad outlines of the curriculum, and counsel regarding the size and kind of faculty needed to execute the new curriculum. Specific recommendations about faculty and staff will be the responsibility of the Transition Team and will be communicated to the faculty and senior staff in September and to all staff in early 2017.

Requests

At this point in our journey, we have three requests for you. The first is to continue to hold our communities in your prayers. As you can easily imagine, while our work is hopeful and exciting, it is also disruptive and at times anxiety-provoking. This is particularly true for our faculty and staff colleagues, not all of whom will find a place in the new venture. Know that we will continue to treat our people with respect and compassion and support them as fully as possible during this time of transition.

The second request is to come to us with questions, concerns, or ideas. Much has been said, and even more assumed, regarding our work that does not always align with our experience, effort, or expectations. We will continue to be as straightforward and forthcoming with information as we have it. If you have questions or suggestions, please contact either or both of us (dlose@Ltsp.edu, mcooper@Ltsg.edu).

Third, we ask that you offer your financial strength to our effort. We rely on the generosity and faithfulness of our constituents to make exceptional education available for our future leaders both increasingly accessible and tuition free, thereby meeting the challenge of providing leaders for the church. Given a strong response to our announcement of stronger financial aid – with both schools at mid-summer already beyond our fall admissions projections – we anticipate a focused first fundraising appeal for scholarships will be launched jointly even while we remain separately functioning institutions this coming academic year.

Please know of our gratitude for your support, gifts, and prayers. This is a significant undertaking that we believe will have a salutary and long-lasting impact on the Church we have been called to serve. But we cannot do it alone. Your partnership and prayers are essential. Thank you. Even more, thank God for you.