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Uniting Pennsylvania Seminaries Choose Name, Launch Presidential Search

“United Lutheran Seminary sums up our vision of the future into which we believe God is calling us,” declared Bishop James Dunlop of Harrisburg, PA at the conclusion of two days of meetings held mid-August in Philadelphia. The name of the consolidated school that will bring together the Lutheran Theological Seminaries at Gettysburg (LTSG) and Philadelphia (LTSP) was the unanimous choice of the governing bodies of two seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

During the special August 18-19 meetings of the boards and their appointed 12-member Transition Team, decisions were made to determine the path forward for the structure of the consolidation and to launch a presidential search for the consolidated school.

Dunlop, who chairs the Transition Team appointed by the boards of the two consolidating seminaries, continued: “With nearly 350 years of combined history, it’s time we joined together. By mid-2017, we will be one school on two campuses. In a time when so many forces in our world seek to divide, our coming together is a powerful witness to our Lord Jesus’ fervent prayer for his followers, ‘that they may all be one.’”

Original plans to consolidate the two existing schools by closing both and creating a new entity were modified at the counsel of Pennsylvania’s Department of Education. In order to preserve licensure and full accreditation, the Department advised that the new school adopt and adapt the existing corporate structure of one of the two schools and have the other join the new venture by closing and transferring its assets. The boards reviewed multiple factors in adopting a plan forward including the schools’ current accreditation status, the complexity of the corporate structures at each school, the transferability of restricted endowments, and the desire to preserve the historical legacy of both schools by retaining the oldest charter. In order to strengthen the mission of the existing schools by creating United Lutheran Seminary hosted on two distinct campuses, the boards decided to use the corporate entity of the seminary in Gettysburg as the continuing educational corporation. The Gettysburg school will therefore adopt revised bylaws this fall, that create a new board of directors constituted by the synods of both supporting regions of the ELCA and additional members appointed by the ELCA’s Church Council. Degrees currently offered by both schools are expected to be retained, and all current students are guaranteed a pathway to complete their degrees without interruption.

During this meeting, both boards also affirmed the Transition Team’s recommendation to launch a search in early fall for the individual who will serve as the first president of the united school. Both current presidents, the Revs. David Lose of Philadelphia and Michael Cooper-White of Gettysburg, have said they will not be candidates. “The quest now begins for a leader who will join us in launching a premier

seminary serving the church and the world of the 21st century,” stated the Rev. Elise Brown of New York City, who serves as the Transition Team’s vice chair. Dunlop and Brown also announced that heading the presidential search committee will be the Rev. Charles Miller of New York City. A graduate of Gettysburg, Miller has served in recent years as a key leader among trustees on the Philadelphia board. Prior to his retirement, Miller was the ELCA’s Executive for Administration, responsible for overseeing daily operations of the church’s national and international work. “In Charles Miller,” the two agreed, “we have a widely respected church leader with deep roots in both of these great schools of the church.”

The governing groups of both existing schools also affirmed broad parameters of curricular design efforts conducted over the summer by a faculty work group. This new curricular structure is not a hybrid of the existing schools but a creative competency-based program that will integrate academic disciplines to yield outcomes needed for 21st century church leaders, rostered and lay. In addition, the boards gave significant attention to measures of transition support for existing faculty and staff members of the two schools. It is expected the workforce of the combined school will be approximately two-thirds that of the current seminaries’ employees. Board chairs Dr. James Lakso of LTSG and the Rev. John Richter of LTSP stated, “We want to do the best we can in supporting all our valued employees, including those whom the emerging unified school will be unable to retain.”

“Our goal all along has been to create a new venture in theological education that enabled us to better prepare leaders responsive to the challenges of the day in a way that is more affordable for students and more sustainable to the larger Church,” said Richter, “and we believe the decisions of the boards accomplish this goal.” Lakso added, “We are seeking the best possible launch for United Lutheran Seminary and both boards affirmed strong support for the use of both campuses and programs distinct to each school including the Urban Theological Institute and the Town and Country Church Institute.” Lose and Cooper-White shared their belief that the new school will strengthen the mission and embrace elements of the ethos and history of both schools.

In more immediate matters, the boards heard encouraging reports on fall enrollment at both schools, who celebrate significant increases in entering new students over the prior year. Also noted is the trend of continuing strong donor support, a key to the recently announced commitment to award full tuition scholarships to all full-time, residential ELCA students while also significantly increasing aid to all other students.

The United Lutheran Seminary will remain in partnership with six other seminaries of the ELCA. The ELCA Church Council needs to approve bylaw changes and ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton will consult in the presidential search process. Gettysburg was founded in 1826 and Philadelphia in 1864.

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