

# United Lutheran Seminary

GETTYSBURG + PHILADELPHIA

May 5, 2017

Greetings from President-Elect Latini

It's only been two weeks since the board of trustees elected me to serve as the first president of United Lutheran Seminary. The highlight of those days was the whirlwind set of introductions to students, staff, faculty, alumni, and church leaders on both the Philadelphia and Gettysburg campuses. I've pondered, in particular, the questions posed to me by so many—questions born of hope and concern, delight and surprise, curiosity and skepticism as well as from needs for trust and collegiality. I look forward to sustained dialogue in the near future about our common calling, about the shape of public theology in North America today, about living into this union of two historic Lutheran institutions, and about the promises of God that uphold us all. As we move closer to those days, I'd like to elaborate further on a few commitments, formative practices, and core beliefs that shape my faith and vision for theological education today.

*Healing, justice, and reconciliation.* On the cross, Jesus cried out, "It is finished." Through Christ, we have been reconciled to God and one another by the power of the Spirit. In baptism, we participate in Christ's death and resurrection and are sent to serve our neighbors. Christ has gone before us. His ministry of healing, justice, and reconciliation is ongoing. The Spirit enlivens and empowers us to participate in this ministry—a ministry that creates life out of nothing, possibility out of impossibility, and hope out of despair in the most unexpected places and ways imaginable. This ministry is first and foremost God's. We respond by stewarding our vocation so that we can accompany and lead God's people.

Participation in this ministry calls for formation of head, heart, and hands. Theological education at United Lutheran Seminary is built upon this awareness and is exemplified in our new competency-based curriculum where acquiring knowledge, learning skills, developing relational capacities, and nurturing certain dispositions come together. I'm thrilled to join this work, as I have framed my teaching of practical theology and pastoral care over the past twelve years as a communally-based, interdisciplinary art and theological endeavor.

*Peace and nonviolence.* We live in volatile times. The smallest spark can light a fire of vitriol, bullying, and hate speech. Profound and too frequently ignored or forgotten injustices pile up daily. Hate crimes against persons of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ persons, and women have been on the rise. Schisms continue to occur in parishes and denominations, and seminary graduates say they need to learn more about conflict mediation. They also need to become public theologians who, by God's grace, resist violence and peacefully witness to God's reign.

United Lutheran Seminary will continue a long history of preaching and practicing peace and nonviolence at its predecessor schools. Just recently, Gettysburg Seminary was awarded a "Lifetime Peacemaking Award" by the Interfaith Center for Peace and Justice. I look forward to joining this work. For the past sixteen years, I have studied, practiced, and taught Nonviolent Communication (NVC), which is an international peacemaking organization, a model for conflict mediation, and spiritual framework for social justice. Like so many gifts from God, I learned about NVC when,

unbeknownst to me, I needed it most. In the years before that, I had interned at a church torn apart by sexual misconduct and then served a church marked by chronic conflict. I also had been caught up in rancorous and dehumanizing sexuality debates in my own denomination. My training in Nonviolent Communication in highly diverse interfaith contexts empowered me to practice peace while also pursuing justice for people so often pushed to the margins of society and the church. It formed in me commitments to full inclusion for LGBTQ+ persons in church and society, and quite serendipitously became the occasion for reconciliation to those with whom I had been estranged. Put another way, it transformed my understanding of the great diversity of God's creation and helped me celebrate that diversity in my ministry and work.

*Cultural competency.* Shifting demographics in the United States pose both significant challenges and bold opportunities for mainline Protestant churches and academic institutions committed to the ongoing education and formation of their leaders. By 2040, the United States will no longer be a majority-minority country but one in which a number of minority ethnic groups together compose the demographics of this nation. In fact, within the next decade, whites will no longer represent the majority of students in ATS schools. It's time for our theologies, our pedagogies, and our policies and practices to catch up to these shifting realities. For that to happen, we need to grow in cultural competency.

Cultural competency is the intentional commitment and active engagement in unlearning racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of bias institutionally and individually. Culturally competent Christian leaders and communities value diversity as integral to the body of Christ, work toward genuine equity in policies and procedures, and include marginalized groups in decision-making processes at all levels. In my most recent work as associate dean of diversity and cultural competency at Western Theological Seminary, I have (1) implemented a plan for the education and training of faculty, staff, and students in cultural competency, (2) created a new required cultural competency course for all master's level students, and (3) given input on seminary-wide policies and personnel matters. I look forward to continuing this dimension of my own vocation as it intersects with the work already begun, for example, through the Urban Theological Institute and our status as a Reconciling in Christ seminary.

*A cruciform life.* Peacemaking, nonviolence, and cultural competency can be understood and practiced in light of the theology of the cross. As we live under the cross, we hear God's YES and God's NO to us individually and corporately. Knowledge of our justification by grace through faith (i.e., God's YES) enables us to hear God's NO to all the ways that we sin against God and neighbor, all the ways we perpetuate death and negation, especially for those with less privilege. When we hear God's NO, we speak in correspondence to it. We cannot call evil good. We must call a thing what it is and do so without self-righteousness. When we hear God's YES, we stand in solidarity with those who suffer most under oppressive systems and structures and we commit to both pray and work for the empowerment of all.

In all this, God's promises uphold us, strengthen us, and renew us. When divisions persist in our families, churches, theological schools, and larger communities, we remember, "In Christ, all things hold together." When intractable sexism, racism, and homophobia destroy life, we call upon the One who vindicates the oppressed and delivers the afflicted. When we confess our complicity in

sinful, unjust systems, we trust we have been justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Again and again, we pray and abide in the One who has and will reconcile all things to God.

I look forward to meeting and talking with you in person in the coming months about our shared vision for United Lutheran Seminary. I begin in my new role July 1.

Peace + grace,

Reverend Dr. Theresa F. Latini