Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Dear ministry partners in the Central/Southern Illinois Synod,

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago is grateful to share highlights from our seminary in this 2026 report to supporting synods. Thank you for your continued support of our innovative and thriving seminary. As we reflect on the past year and look ahead to 2026–2027, I am pleased to share some key developments and our aspirations for the future:

- This year marked a historic leadership transition as I began service as LSTC's eighth president on July 1, 2025. My vision for this new chapter is rooted in accessibility, collaboration, and hospitality: theological education for all who desire it, strengthened partnerships across synods and the wider church, and a community where every learner is seen, valued, and accompanied. My inauguration, held alongside our Seminary Showcase this past November, publicly launched this next era of mission-driven innovation at LSTC.

- LSTC is also pleased to announce the appointment of The Rev. Robert O. Smith, Ph.D., as our new Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, effective January 12, 2026. An enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and an ordained ELCA pastor, Dr. Smith brings deep expertise at the intersections of race, religion, and Indigeneity, along with extensive experience in global mission and ecumenical leadership. In addition to serving as Associate Professor of Authentic Diversity, Justice, and Public Church, he will oversee our academic programs and guide LSTC's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice commitments, including the Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice and the Pero Center for Intersectionality Studies.

- Our 2024–2029 Strategic Plan, *On the Way*, continues to guide LSTC's work across four core areas: Asynchronous Education, Philanthropic Campaign, Policy Review, and Staffing Strategy. This past year we celebrated the successful completion of Phase I of our "Time to Re-Imagine, Re-Invent, Reaffirm, and Re-New" campaign, surpassing our initial goal and securing significant scholarship support. Now, we are embarking on Phase II of our Campaign, a two-year journey to support our institution's programs, pathways, and scholarships.

- Project Starling—LSTC's asynchronous digital learning platform—has moved from vision to reality. Under the leadership of Vice President for Enterprise Innovation Keisha Dyson, Project Starling is now in its final user testing phase and provides flexible formation for TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries), Synodically Authorized Ministers (SAMs), and independent learners who seek high-quality theological education beyond traditional degree paths. Through Project Starling, learners can access content at their own pace, engage with LSTC faculty and practitioners, and participate in user-testing cohorts that help shape future offerings. Partnerships with synods continue to inform our design and priorities for this work.

- A central expression of Project Starling is the SAM Development Training Program, an asynchronous, certificate-based training pathway for Synodically Authorized Ministers. Developed by LSTC faculty and aligned with ELCA competency areas, this program helps SAMs:
  – understand and assess ministry contexts using public-church and ethnographic frameworks;
  – engage key themes in church history and Lutheran theology;
  – reflect on identity and vocation through intercultural and intersectional lenses;
  – grow in community organizing, contextual leadership, and pastoral practice; and
  – deepen spiritual disciplines for lay ministry.
  Designed for use in cohorts or as individualized study (with bishop authorization), the SAM program provides synods with a scalable, high-quality resource for forming lay leaders for emerging ministry contexts.

- In 2025, LSTC received a Pathways for Tomorrow implementation grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to launch a Public Church Hub and expand accessible, community-designed learning for pastoral and lay leaders. Building on Project Starling, this three-year initiative will co-create short, flexible offerings—modules, intensives, workshops, certificates, and cohorts—with LGBTQ-affirming missional communities and Latiné and African-descent ministries. New staffing funded by the grant will support congregational listening, pilot sites, and iterative program design. The Public Church Hub widens pathways beyond degrees, strengthens recruitment into our degree programs, and advances LSTC's commitment to form leaders in partnership with the communities they serve.

- Campus life and formation remain central to our mission. Christian worship continues to be enriched by the leadership of the Gordon Braatz Chair of Worship, Dr. Christian Scharen, and our faculty and student leaders. Homecoming and the Queer Symposium will gather alumni, students, and friends for learning, celebration, and reflection on the intersections of faith, identity, and justice. We look forward to welcoming a new class of learners in the coming year and to celebrating our next commencement, when we send graduates into the world as public-church leaders.

To learn more about LSTC, Project Starling, the SAM Development Training Program, and the Public Church Hub, please visit **www.lstc.edu**. We are deeply grateful for your prayers, financial support, and partnership in forming leaders for the church and the world.

With gratitude,

Rev. Dr. Shauna Hannan, President
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago