

Strategic Initiatives: Planning for the Future

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As we mark the 125th anniversary of North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) and celebrate the school's history, we also look to its future. Speaking to a group of Covenant leaders a few years ago, John Wimmer, program director of the Lilly Endowment's religious division, said that the line between the laity and clergy is blurring today to an extent not seen since the Reformation. In this changing context, North Park Theological Seminary seeks to be an institution committed to serving the whole church. We endeavor to do this by leveraging the gifts of our talented faculty and staff, through new pedagogical models, institutional and denominational partnerships, and our location in one of the world's leading cities.

In planning for the future we strive to live into the following strategic initiatives: (1) theological education for the whole church, (2) missional alignment with Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) partners, (3) missional and multicultural competency, (4) innovative pathways to sustainability and affordability, and (5) ecumenical partnerships. These initiatives will guide NPTS into the future as we work to share the riches of the theological academy with the whole church.

Theological Education for the Whole Church

In the past decade, the seminary classroom has been changing. No longer are seminary courses filled primarily with those in pursuit of a senior pas-

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tor role. Many bi-vocational pastors and lay leaders now attend seminary to earn degrees or certificates. Many students, whether admitted into a traditional degree program or a certificate program, are taking classes online and in intensive-hybrid formats rather than relocating to Chicago. As the ECC becomes more multiethnic and multicultural, the seminary is working with denominational partners (e.g., CHET, Centro Hispano de Estudios Teológicos) to provide all pastors an opportunity to enjoy the richness of a Covenant theological education.

In meeting the needs of the changing demographics of the church, we have embarked on a vigorous strategy of “right-sizing” and “right-timing” our master of divinity degree, launching a revised degree in the fall of 2015. This degree requires fewer credit hours, decreasing its cost by 14 percent, with a strengthened and simplified core curriculum and a renewed emphasis on preaching, intercultural studies, and pastoral leadership. While we have reduced the number of credits needed to earn a degree, we anticipate the number of courses taken over a graduate’s lifetime to increase as the interest in and demand for lifelong learning opportunities grow.

We now offer two certificates aimed at practitioners in the field. In partnership with the Covenant mission priority of Start and Strengthen Churches, we have launched certificate programs in church planting and in congregational vitality, taught by teams of denominational practitioners and seminary scholars. Additional certificate programs in development include missional preaching, pastoral care, conflict mediation, and church administration. In addition to their educational value, certificates offer a unique environment within the classroom, as current seminary students, seasoned pastoral and church leaders, and lay leaders participate together, enhancing the educational experience.

Finally, to provide theological education for the whole church we must continue to expand our teaching platforms. This involves enhancing our extensive online and intensive-hybrid offerings and building partnerships with denominational and affiliated groups to ensure we are reaching a diverse array of people—especially those groups who have experienced barriers to pursuing theological education historically. To this end, NPTS will lead a collaborative effort in innovative models for theological education, giving structure and providing resources to CHET, the ECC’s emerging partnership with the Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) of World Impact, the pastoral training center in Alaska, and other regional training centers in our conferences.

Missional Alignment with ECC Partners

Not only does NPTS seek to provide theological education for the whole church, we also endeavor to bring the seminary, the denomination, and its partners into greater missional alignment. In the years ahead, NPTS will continue to strengthen these relationships, developing partnerships that foster streamlined student learning and stronger, more diverse community relationships.

We are exploring options for establishing a center for lifelong learning in cooperation with the Covenant Ministerium to offer and coordinate educational programs for ministry leaders. The center would offer symposia and workshops on critical issues in ministry practice. It would continue to build on the seminary's network of relationships with field education and CPE sites, providing ongoing hands-on training for ministry leaders. The center would work with the denomination to offer multicultural and diversity training as well as promote denominational initiatives such as Sankofa and Journey to Mosaic within the pastoral community.

In addition to denominational partnerships, we are pursuing further opportunities for collaboration with our university colleagues. These include joint teaching between the seminary and the university's Biblical and Theological Studies (BTS) Department, providing students with a broader spectrum of professors. Also in collaboration with the BTS Department, we envision developing a "fast-track" undergraduate to seminary degree. The seminary currently cross-lists its courses, allowing undergraduates to take seminary classes for undergraduate credit. We hope to expand this partnership, providing undergraduates advance standing toward a seminary degree and making it possible to complete both a bachelor degree and an MDiv degree within five to six years.

NPTS and the university's School of Business and Non-Profit Administration have a long history of collaboration that will remain strong into the future. Our dual degrees allow students to gain both a theological education and skills for the all-important administrative side of running a ministry or non-profit organization. A new master's degree in counseling, offered through the School of Professional Studies (formerly the School of Adult Learning), holds great potential for workshops and symposia on pastoral care for current students and ministers in the field.

Missional and Multicultural Competency

In alignment with NPU's core value of being purposely multicultural and

the ECC's mission priorities Love Mercy Do Justice and Serve Globally, NPTS strives in both faculty and student body to reflect the image of God as it is seen in the faces of all nations and cultures. This compels us to create recruitment strategies and employment practices that seek out underrepresented populations. It also compels us to foster an environment at NPTS that is welcoming and open to all people.

NPTS has enjoyed a strong relationship with Serve Globally of the ECC. This is further strengthened by our appointment of Al Tizon, current executive minister of serve globally, as affiliate associate professor of missional and global leadership. Tizon and Paul de Neuvi, director for the Center for World Christian Studies, have excelled in building relationships with partner institutions in South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. Through the Center for World Christian Studies, NPTS serves as a resource for partner churches across the globe. Next spring, in collaboration with Serve Globally and Start and Strengthen Churches, we will begin offering the church planting certificate to the Covenant Church in Taiwan. We also hope to offer our certificates and potentially degree programs to our partner churches in the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches. These partnerships strengthen the cross-cultural competency of NPTS students and Covenant pastors. As the ECC becomes more reflective of all of God's people, NPTS intends to be at the forefront of engagement with the world.

Sustainability and Affordability

The ongoing need to keep seminary education affordable and our institutional operation sustainable has led to innovative solutions. Working with Covenant Trust Company, National Covenant Properties, and the finance division of the ECC, as well as North Park University, we are in the process of developing the North Park Plan—an interest-free lending strategy meant to keep overall lending costs low for our students while increasing per student tuition revenue to the institution.

In 2012 the Lilly Endowment awarded NPTS a \$250,000 grant to establish a program to address economic challenges facing future ministers. This grant enabled us to pursue our MDiv curriculum revision, offer financial counseling to every seminary student, and implement programing aimed at raising our students' financial acuity. An additional three-year sustainability grant of \$125,000, awarded by Lilly in November 2015, has enabled us to research and develop new strategies for funding theological education.

We are researching the viability of a plan that would supply all of our students with a modest interest-free loan to cover their tuition costs. Such loans would come from major initial gifts from donors that will be invested and will also secure a larger credit facility. This would form a captive loan pool to cover seminary tuition, allowing students to defer all payment until graduation. Students would make a modest monthly payment for seven years following graduation. These payments will go back into the loan pool to help replenish funds. Through investment and program management provided by affiliates of the ECC, there is also a significant tuition discount built into the program, and the interest-free nature of the loan reduces the overall costs of seminary further. Students will also be encouraged to form a team of ministry partners to help support a portion of their education, financially and in prayer. These ministry partners can help reduce costs even further while bringing a sense of support and community to the students. Students will be held to minimum standards of performance in order to continue to qualify.

This plan offers benefits to the institution and the broader church. Financially healthy ministers are healthier ministers in general. The North Park Plan invites the seminary to practice responsible, Christ-centered stewardship toward its students and gives students the opportunity to partner with individuals, churches, and organizations to help fund and support their theological education. This lending strategy is founded on the conviction that we are all in this together—the seminary, students, congregations, organizations, and the ECC as a whole are all impacted by the education that takes place at NPTS.

Ecumenical Partnerships

Our founders called themselves “Mission Friends,” and as heirs of this tradition NPTS seeks to collaborate with denominations and organizations as well as local, state, and federal government to live out the gospel of Christ, serving our city and world. Located in America’s third largest city, NPTS seeks to be the world’s foremost urban center for theological training and missional leadership. Currently we are building educational partnerships with Volunteers for America, Salvation Army, Assemblies of God Church, Young Life, Vineyard, and the Community Christian Development Association.

NPTS also seeks to develop a center for holistic evangelism and urban ministry, to serve as a bridge to our doctor of urban ministry leadership degree and provide ministry training and resources to inner-city churches

across the United States. Under the Urban Evangelical Grant Initiative, “Exploring the Spirituality and Religious Expressions of Millennials/ Gen Y within the United States,” the center would research methods of engaging urban, multiethnic evangelicals.

A highlight for North Park in the area of ecumenical partnerships has been the development of a course taught by Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom at Stateville Correctional Facility in Chicago. This course involves both seminary students and Stateville students learning together. Some Stateville students have expressed the desire to continue their education at North Park after their release. This endeavor shines light on the type of restorative justice we as a community of believers can bring about in our city and world.

Looking Back to Go Forward

In 1901, ten years after the seminary’s founding, the school’s president David Nyvall shared with graduates his vision for the young school’s future. He desired North Park to be,

an institution which may deserve to bear the name of a mission school, a school where the gospel of Christ is the acknowledged standard of culture, fostering a school life whose very pulse is the love of Christ and of all those whom he loves, making this school a center from which radiates to all ends of the world the light of Christ’s truth, and the warmth of Christ’s love, and the beauty of Christ’s character.¹

One hundred and fifteen years later, North Park Theological Seminary’s mission and vision remain that of Nyvall’s: to be a center from which the light of Christ’s love, truth, and character radiates to the ends of the world. We set our hearts, minds, and dreams on this vision. We pray our students, lay and clergy, are inspired by their seminary education to become missional leaders to the global church, and thus fulfill the mission of Christ.

1. Quoted in Scott E. Erickson, *David Nyvall and the Shape of an Immigrant Church: Ethnic, Denominational, and Educational Priorities among Swedes in America* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1996), 267.