

Luther Seminary leans into the future with accelerated MDiv program

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Luther Seminary has a 150-year history of listening to the Spirit and adapting to address the challenges of ministry leaders. Attending to this call—that comes with an urgency driven by the cries of the local church and an awareness of the shifts in society and theological education—recently invited a new set of questions and pushed the seminary to take bigger risks.

In 2017, our board of directors adopted a new vision statement—*The Holy Spirit calls Luther Seminary to lead faithful innovation for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing world*—committing our institution to engage the work of not only leaning into the future, but also changing for the sake of the future. We began with intentional listening and experimentation. We listened to congregations, candidates, and church leaders and discovered that deep shifts are underway.

The church needs leaders who are adaptive and curious about what God is doing in their lives and communities. Equipping clergy and lay leaders is not only about providing resources, but also about making connections and supporting them as they navigate the transition from established structures to a mix of inherited and emerging forms of community, or what's sometimes called the "mixed ecology." Leaning into the future of theological education requires tending to these realities as well.



What emerged was MDivX—a five-year pilot to test the feasibility and effectiveness of a 24-month, accelerated MDiv program. This "holy experiment" had students taking courses year-round, completing concurrent internships and clinical pastoral education while embedded in their congregational contexts. Borrowing from the wisdom of other professional degree programs, the pilot encompassed three distinct cohorts that provided critical academic and peer support.

A rigorous analysis of assessment data from MDivX and other programs has demonstrated that the accelerated MDiv model works. Student learning outcomes in MDivX were on par with the traditional MDiv program in the areas of biblical hermeneutics, cultural context, history of Christianity, and leadership for ministry. MDivX students outperformed their peers in the areas of formation, Christian ministry praxis, and theology. While MDivX students lagged behind peer groups in other areas, the data shows the program works well overall. Our graduation rate was 95 percent due, in part, to generous support.

The program has caused Luther Seminary to change. The learnings from that experiment fed into a curricular refresh being implemented this fall. The refreshed curriculum reduced the number of required courses in our degree programs, created multiple distinct pathways (including formalizing an accelerated two-year MDiv), and incorporated intentional communal elements into all programs. It also allowed us to experience institutional change and redesign policies and practices.

Other innovations that arose from our period of listening included implementing our Jubilee Scholarship initiative—a successful full-tuition scholarship model to reduce student debt. We also heard about the challenges of forming Christian faith and community in our contemporary culture, so we cultivated an ecosystem of resources for addressing these challenges through our Faith+Lead initiative. We learned that ministry leaders with various responsibilities and roles are seeking access to high-quality theological education that is affordable, accessible, and accommodating of diverse contexts, so we stretched the limitations of our current theological structures and designed an online, non-degree academy within Faith+Lead.

Listening, removing barriers, opening our imagination, and experimenting is exciting and unnerving work—exactly the work we are called to at this time. Theological education is needed today as much as it has been in any time in history, but the ways and means by which we live this call must be revisited.



photo courtesy of Luther Seminary

Seminary leaders, among many other things, need to be honest about the adaptive challenges we face. As deans, we are writing this amid staff changes, fluid student enrollment numbers, and uncertainty about potential changes within our denomination. We personally know the desire to provide quick fixes to today's massive adaptive challenges, yet God continues to be at work and new possibilities are endless.

This is our story—one school seeking to align our mission, vision, and values to the changing landscape of the church in a rapidly changing world. We engage this work with hope, not because of our own abilities, but because God continues to be present in the world and within the local church. We lean into the future because we want to join the Spirit's movement in this time and place. What might the Holy Spirit be inviting your school to imagine?



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