

A Letter to Luther Seminary Concerning Institutional Racism

*To Luther Seminary Board of Directors, Board of Trustees, President Steinke, and the Student Body:

We write to you as alumni, who have a vested interest in Luther Seminary. As members and leaders of the church, we understand the critical importance of having healthy and vibrant spaces to shape and form those discerning a vocation in public ministry. This call is unique and specific and the educational and discernment processes are best served by pointed and concerted formation and diverse experiences. Luther Seminary has been such a place for us and we pray it continues to be for generations of leaders to come. Yet, over the course of the current academic year, through official Luther Seminary communications and our collegial relationships with the current student body, the undersigned have become deeply concerned with the current circumstances at Luther Seminary, especially those surrounding the former Dean of Students, Rev. Angela Shannon and the ongoing frustrations of students of non-white color. Luther Seminary is a place of transformation for individuals and now we are calling for Luther to transform itself, particularly at its highest levels, into an institution where faith leaders, particularly those of non-white color, flourish.

We begin by confessing our own complicity in racist structures, particularly those of Luther Seminary. As students and alumni, too many of us have remained oblivious or silent in the face of the negative experiences of people of non-white color in this institution, particularly our fellow students. We yearn to see God transform the ELCA in all its expressions as well as the church catholic and society as a whole to reflect God's promise to heal the nations. (Revelation 22:2) As Luther alumni, we care deeply about the capacity of the institution to train leaders to do this healing work that the world so desperately needs. We recognize that it is one corner of the church where our voices ought to be valued and so we feel it is our responsibility to demand an institutional commitment to dismantling racist structures and creating a space where the people of God honor all nations, cultures, and races. (Revelation 21:26)

The most concerning and recent incident is the continued lack of transparency around the dissolution between the Seminary and the former Dean of Students, Rev. Angela Shannon. While the details of her leaving remain unclear, the departure of a highly-respected and well-known clergy woman of non-white color, who is our colleague and elder, following a racially-charged incident on campus with less than four months on the job raises significant questions about the structural and cultural capacity of the seminary to help people of non-white color flourish in leadership positions. The communication that followed from the office of the President contained language that is commonly employed by white institutions uncomfortable with the administrative approach and cultural style of a leader, particularly an African-American one. This comment from President Steinke is of notable concern: "we discerned that Dean Shannon's calling is to positions that allow her to more fully express her remarkable pastoral gifts, as opposed to positions that are more institutional and administrative." Since that time, the silence from the Seminary and from Rev. Shannon regarding her departure has only served to intensify our concern.

While we are grateful for the current work toward "confessing the presence of racism at Luther and calling our institution to shine a light on it and repent," we must note that the racism we are highlighting is of an insidious sort that lurks in the power of decision-makers, administrators, and trustees. That is why it is essential that Luther Seminary not hide behind institutional work with anti-racism training and inclusion without concrete, public confession and repentance of the ways racism has infected our seminary.



Because community listening forums are run and overseen by those with institutional power, they are ineffective and oft harmful, mimicking resolution without accountability or responsibility. We request the formation of a small forum of community stakeholders that includes alumni and students. This forum will hear directly from the President and leadership of Luther Seminary, serving as a form of accountability for the work of confronting the structural racism within the seminary. The President and trustees will then work in collaboration with students to formulate a strategy by which Luther intends to prevent future events like the departure of Rev. Shannon. This is not a listening session, therefore questions and answers will be available publicly for those who cannot be present. Additional public meetings will then be arranged to continue to clarify the situation and solicit ideas for reparation and reconciliation. In tandem with these forums we request an opportunity for public repentance and the proclamation of forgiveness (Privacy of affected parties will be respected).

In an effort to demonstrate our commitment to dismantling racism at Luther Seminary, we vow to do the following until tangible and public results are seen:

- 1) Withhold our personal financial support
- 2) Withhold any encouragement of additional support to Luther Seminary in our current congregations and/or spheres of influence
- 3) Discourage those pursuing seminary education from attending Luther Seminary

We are not washing our hands of Luther Seminary. We are using our influence, such as it is, to amplify the voices and experiences of the people of non-white color currently engaged in the institution. As a contingency of alumni we are placing our trust and support in the students of non-white color and their ongoing work through student-led organizations such as ReCharge and DR:BC. It is from them, the students of non-white color, both residential and distributed, that we will take our cues. Collectively we will hold to the above actions until such a time as students of non-white color affirm that they feel heard and experience the institution's commitment to naming and transforming its racism.

We believe God has given Luther Seminary the necessary gifts and abilities to transform the institution into one which lives into the diversity of the body of Christ, yet we remain concerned that the racism that exists in the highest levels of Luther remains unexamined while tangible steps toward change have been occurring within the student body and faculty. It is time we as a church body, from our seminaries to our congregations, dare to die to the old ways, trusting that we will be resurrected into a fuller body of Christ and to this end, be assured that we continue to pray for Luther Seminary, the students, staff, and administration of this institution central to our leadership formation.

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