
[Faculty] ELT Response to Student Proposal

2 messages

President's Office <presoff@luthersem.edu>

Wed, Mar 23, 2022 at 8:51 AM

To: Faculty <faculty@luthersem.edu>, "staff@luthersem.edu" <staff@luthersem.edu>, Students <students@luthersem.edu>

Dear Luther community,

Last month, the Diversity Committee of the Student Council and Emmaus Student Organization sent a proposal to the Luther Seminary Board of Directors requesting the Seminary initiate the formal process to join the Reconciling in Christ program. In the weeks that have followed, students have presented their proposal to various staff and faculty groups, including the ABIDE committee, Faculty Concerns Committee, and division chairs, as well as to a number of open student forums. In addition, student leadership met with President Steinke and Dr. Leon Rodrigues this past Monday.

We are grateful to our students for their engagement in our collective commitment to inclusion and belonging. We're reaching out today to clarify next steps and outline the process for moving forward.

Our Welcome Statement, adopted in 2018, details our commitment to inclusion and belonging in service of our mission to educate leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and serve in God's world.

Luther Seminary is a learning community rooted in the unconditional promise of God's love for all people. In Christ, all are neighbors to one another. In a dynamic of mutual welcome, we seek to learn from one another's particularities, including but not limited to differences of race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic circumstance, dis/ability, political perspective, ecclesial tradition, and theological commitments.

We believe the Holy Spirit is at work in our community and in the world today, bringing about God's preferred future. We recognize the urgency to live more fully into the goals of our Welcome Statement. Our strategic plan, which was developed following more than 60 listening sessions across our community, calls for educating and coaching our community around expectations, goals, assessment, and reporting related to inclusion and belonging. The plan also emphasizes the importance of cultivating relationships across differences in our community grounded in our unity in Christ. This is critical both for the health of our own community and because the places our graduates are called to serve will likely reflect these differences and more.

Luther Seminary will not initiate a formal process to join the Reconciling in Christ program at this time—not because the seminary doesn't share our students' commitment to inclusion, belonging, and accountability, but because our Welcome Statement represents a broad vision for belonging, our current strategic plan is dedicated to addressing the root causes of our challenges, and more listening and discussion is required in our community.

Moving forward, Dr. Rodrigues, interim dean of students and vice president for inclusion and belonging, will collaborate with and support students in initiating a community-wide listening process where together we can continue to learn from one another, identify our challenging behaviors (both old and new), discern next steps around goals and accountability for anti-racism and LGBTQIA2S+ justice, and, with God's help, deepen our commitment to reconciliation. Dr. Rodrigues has our trust and we give thanks to God that he accepted this call to Luther Seminary.

In closing, we wish to clarify the Seminary's governance processes. The Board of Directors may designate advisory members from the student body, alumni, faculty and staff to attend meetings of the Board, and they are welcomed with voice, not vote (Luther Seminary Bylaws, Article V Section 2). As a result, advisory members are not eligible to bring proposals directly before the Board for action. Per the Student Handbook, students are to direct grievances and concerns to the Dean of Students, who is responsible for determining the type of review required and appropriate course of action (Student Handbook p. 59, 65).

Our LGBTQIA2S+ and BIPOC students and colleagues, and all our siblings in Christ who face marginalization and oppression, are valued members of our community—they belong at Luther Seminary. As a community of faith, we are committed to one another's flourishing for the sake of Christ's Church and we rely on the promise of God's love, grace and justice to abide with us.

Strength and peace,

Robin Steinke, President

Leon Rodrigues, Interim Dean of Students and Vice President for Inclusion and Belonging

Heidi Droegemueller, Vice President for Seminary Relations

Terri Elton, Interim Dean of Academic Affairs

Rolf Jacobson, Interim Dean of Faculty

Randy Kyle, Chief Human Resources Officer

Michael Morrow, Vice President of Finance and Administration

Dwight Zscheile, Vice President of Innovation

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The Rev. Robin J. Steinke, Ph.D.

President

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Bergen Nelson <bnelson003@luthersem.edu>

Wed, Mar 23, 2022 at 3:00 PM

To: President's Office <presoff@luthersem.edu>, Faculty <faculty@luthersem.edu>, "staff@luthersem.edu" <staff@luthersem.edu>, Students <students@luthersem.edu>

Cc: Lauren Mildahl <lmildahl001@luthersem.edu>, Stephanie Newman <snewman001@luthersem.edu>, Benjamin Cox <bcox001@luthersem.edu>, Collis Floyd <cfloyd001@luthersem.edu>, Esther Sianipar <esianipar001@luthersem.edu>, Timothy Schroeder <tschroeder002@luthersem.edu>, Mary Hess <mhess@luthersem.edu>

Dear President Steinke and members of the ELT,

As members of the RIC Committee we are deeply disappointed by the communication sent today. We are saddened that this leadership seems so consumed either by fear or pride that you will not even entertain the prospect of becoming Reconciling In Christ. We are hurt that you claim to seek justice and reconciliation for marginalized people in our community but you insist that it must be on your terms only. A community has told you, clearly and explicitly, a concrete action step that they need to feel welcomed and included, and you have dismissed it without any clear explanation for why this action is not possible. In addition to this email, one of our members has created an annotated version of your message that uncovers and clarifies the misinformation and harmful rhetoric you used to dismiss our proposal and our efforts. It is attached to this email.

If you are, in good faith, eager to pursue reconciliation and live more fully into the Welcome Statement, we are asking plainly for these three things:

1. That the ELT commissions a task force around the goals and accountability for anti-racism and LGBTQIA2S+ justice that is chaired by a third-party outside of the Seminary. The trust between our committee and the leadership has been broken. We understand that Dr. Rodrigues has your trust, but frankly, he does not have ours. We want to repair this relationship and move forward in a Spirit of reconciliation, but that cannot happen in the current power dynamic.
2. A public statement outlining the specific reasons that Luther has avoided the RIC journey for so long. This clarity is long overdue. The lack of transparency has been frustrating and harmful to those within our institution and to prospective students. Rumors abound that allow antagonism and mistrust to fester. This issue cannot be quietly put to bed by the administration, but must be addressed, sent to the student body, and published on the seminary website as soon as possible.
3. A public apology to the members of the RIC Committee and the Student Council. It is shameful and unacceptable how we have been treated and dismissed. We understand that this has been a turbulent time in the leadership with many abrupt changes, but that does not excuse the run around, miscommunication, and even manipulation we have experienced. We have done everything we were instructed to do, only to have the rug pulled out from under us. Our time and emotional labor should be respected.
4. That a voting student member be added to the board of directors or some other method devised so that students have a clear and direct path to be heard by the board. We wish to clarify a misleading statement from the communication you sent today. The email claims that we “sent a proposal to the Board of Directors.” We have tried, but that proposal was not allowed to be sent. We want this conversation to take place at the highest level of our institution. We believe that students have the right to be heard and the right to ask for clarity on this issue. It is true that our proposal was addressed to the board, but this email seems to imply that the Board received our proposal. They have not. And the path we had been directed to, going through the Student Affairs Committee of the Board has been blocked. We were supposed to be on the agenda of the Student Affairs Committee at their next meeting in May and we have been removed. We understand that the governance structure does not include students having a vote on the board, but we feel in no way that we are welcomed to the Board “with a voice.” It is time for that to change.

In Christ and in grief,

Lauren Mildahl, MDiv Residential Juniors Rep, Student Council, co-chair of the RIC Committee
Stephanie Newman, GLBTQAI(+) Rep, Student Council, co-chair of the RIC Committee
Ben Cox, Student Council Vice President, student member of the RIC Committee
Bergen Eickhoff, Proclaim Representative, student member of the RIC Committee
Collis Floyd, Ecumenical Rep, Student Council, student member of the RIC Committee
Esther Sianipar, Student Council President, student member of the RIC Committee
Tim Schroeder, senior admissions counselor, staff member of the RIC Committee
Dr. Mary Hess, faculty advisor to the Student Council, faculty member of the RIC Committee

[Quoted text hidden]

2 attachments



President Steinke's Letter Annotated By Luther Seminary's Proclaim Representative.pdf
105K



President Steinke's Letter Annotated By Luther Seminary's Proclaim Representative.docx
233K