

Luther Seminary's Calling to ABIDE (draft as of May 2021)

Accountability | Belonging | Inclusion | Diversity | Equity

Luther Seminary is a learning community rooted in the unconditional promise of God's love for all people. We affirm the Bible's assertion that the Holy Spirit gathers and forms communities in God's mercy and justice within a world composed of neighbors—some familiar, some strange. In response, Luther Seminary commits itself to exemplify community in distinctively liberative and loving ways, trusting that our communal life, our pursuit of our mission, and our practices can bear witness to the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ. The acronym ABIDE summarizes vital facets of that commitment and reminds us that we pursue it with explicitly theological motives and goals. Abiding together in the love of God, this community prays for the Spirit of the risen Christ, who calls us into this work, to accompany us even with our imperfect efforts.

No single acronym or theological symbol can encompass the full range of values that must take root in a gospel-centered community. Nor does a theologically motivated approach to justice excuse the institution from listening to and learning from other fields of knowledge and other perspectives that will help us live into our values. Indeed, theology can provide tools for oppression and pretexts for dominance; but it can also inspire and discipline us. It is not enough to think of ourselves as a community that abides with Christ and one another. We also commit to put that theological identity into action, together, by pursuing just policies, tending a common culture that encourages everyone to be free and to flourish, and practicing our shared faith as people securely situated in divine grace.

To abide with one another is to commit to be in relationship. Abiding is therefore active and dynamic, never passive or complacent. When Jesus spoke about his abiding with God as a mutual, reciprocal union of love and purpose, he invited the world to share that same intimate, life-giving union with God. A community that abides with God together must acknowledge that this mysterious participation in God's love requires each of us to be other-directed; it calls us to be present to one another, to advocate for those who experience disadvantage, to embrace truth even when it stings, and to celebrate the blessings that sustain us. We cannot abide together with God without honoring each person's dignity and worth and without dismantling the divisions and biases that hinder us.

To be in relationships that embody God's presence and truth, expressed through self-giving love, requires our openness to change and growth. Abiding together in God is not about mere comfort, rest, or surviving for another generation. Christ urges us to commit to one another as God commits to humanity and the creation. We make this commitment while remaining honest about our propensity to retreat into fear, division, and contempt.

The five pieces of the ABIDE acronym lend themselves well to many kinds of organizations. As a community that discovers its identity and shared purpose through the lived testimony, cross, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ, however, the seminary recognizes that our Christian practices influence our perceptions of this work. The things that Christians affirm and do, whether in worship services or in the course of daily life, teach us and give us power and perspective to abide. We rely on those practices to orient us, correct us, and compel us to persevere. For God's abiding love manifests itself in truth and action and not merely in word or speech.

Accountability

Accountability means our efforts to abide must be demonstrated, effective, and expected. As individuals who are forgiven by God, still learning to forgive one another, and welcomed corporately to abide with God through Christ, we remain accountable to God to love neighbors as ourselves and to seek all people's well-being. Because the freedom we receive through Christ is not freedom from responsibility, each of us must hold ourselves, the institution's values, its governing policies, and our communal culture accountable to the invitation we have received to abide in God's love. With integrity and a commitment to pursuing equity, the seminary strives to attain outcomes that foster justice for all members of the community and the broader society in which God calls us to serve. Therefore we will regularly assess the seminary's progress so as to ensure that we are indeed progressing in our commitments. Our embrace of accountability also means that members of the community can and should be shown where they fall short by others, especially by those who experience marginalization or exclusion.

A Christian practice: Confession. By confessing sin, we encounter God, acknowledge our accountability, face the pain we cause and suffer, and experience anew the power of truth. Confession goes beyond remorse and contrition; it means we tell it like it is in the presence of God. We confess our individual shortcomings as well as the historical exclusions and structural disadvantages that have constructed barriers in our institution. Speaking the truth to ourselves, alongside one another, and before God, we experience healing and discover new illumination to guide us toward repair. Confession keeps us situated on paths of repentant and renewed living.

Belonging

Belonging means each individual in this community is welcome and has a share in the seminary. If we fail to emphasize that we all belong to one another and to God through Christ, the seminary's efforts at inclusion and welcome will shrink into assimilationism, tolerance, or one-directional hospitality that treats members of the community as perpetual guests or as newcomers who must adapt to fit in. Diversity and inclusion can be improved through policies and initiatives. A shared experience of belonging to one another and to the seminary's mission requires more: everyone in the community bears responsibility to transform our common culture. If each person is to claim the community as theirs, it will take more than an ethos of politeness. Just as Jesus addresses each one who belongs to his flock by name, a culture of belonging can come about when no one exists as an "other." When people belong, everyone's distinctive identity, contributions, and value receive recognition. Institutional canons or longstanding traditions must be reexamined to rid them of prejudicial impulses and outcomes. Those reexaminations are especially incumbent on the seminary's faculty, staff, and administrators, who steward the institutional culture over time.

A Christian practice: Baptism. Baptism joins us to the living Christ and to every other person who belongs to his body. Through baptism God puts to death all conventional standards people use to measure or protect value and privilege. The waters of baptism do not dissolve or dilute anyone's individuality and distinctive identity; instead, those aspects of who each of us is infuse the greater body of Christ with expressions of new life and new possibilities. As a result, we commit to one another as companions joined in unity, not uniformity.

Inclusion

Inclusion means everyone has particular contributions to make here. This is less about engineering institutional effectiveness and more about maintaining a commitment to be an accessible community that nurtures life-giving relationships. Communion with God makes possible authentic communion with others. Encounters with divine love create abiding relationships that are creatively reciprocal, not transactional in cold or calculating ways. An inclusive community therefore intentionally creates and guards space for others, whether that means deliberately elevating another person's contributions or engaging in vicarious service for the sake of those who are burdened by oppression. Inclusion must be a priority in all aspects of institutional life and pedagogical activity to ensure that voices are represented and stubborn barriers to communal participation and generous representation are removed.

A Christian practice: Communion. In the Lord's Supper the living Christ hosts the table and welcomes all, leaving no one hungry. When we partake in this meal we collectively bear witness to new creation coming into existence, for we embody a community that renounces dominance and makes room for everyone. Feasting with Christ while pursuing joyful fellowship with one another, we embody the truths that God's promises are for all people, that Christ has set us free from sin, and that our broken relationships can be mended.

Diversity

Diversity means we discover God in a community that celebrates differences. Humanity bears the divine image collectively, in our diversity. The variety on display in creation expresses divine delight and generosity. The witness of scripture warns that sameness and insularity prove dangerous; they can lead toward idolatry and a desire to embrace oppressive norms. Often the promises of God come to fruition outside the circle of what was familiar or expected. A community that cultivates diversity—while recognizing and valuing the particularity of all its members—therefore demonstrates a commitment to hearing and discerning the word of God. There are many valid ways of describing diversity and people's identifying attributes. We commit ourselves toward diversity in all segments of our organizational structure not as an abstract or romanticized value. Nor do we consider diversity as something defined merely by categories or statistics. We are first and foremost committed to individuals who in their shared diversity image God.

A Christian practice: Vocation. The Holy Spirit connects us as members of a diverse community, which finds its center in Christ and no other norm. In that diversity we discover a multitude of God-given gifts and callings that connect to differing beliefs, cultural backgrounds, religious experiences, and life journeys. In those gifts and callings, God equips and accompanies us. God thus commissions us as witnesses whose presence, speech, and deeds can make a difference in the world, not only in our professions but in all facets of life and their respective vocations. Just as each person has innate dignity as a child of God, so too the multiple and diverse vocations active among our community have worth, for Christ sustains them to bear fruit.

Equity

Equity means the adoption, performance, and preservation of just policies, systems, governance, and practices. Equity differs from equality, in that equity takes account of and attempts to rectify the different needs and disadvantages that inhibit some people more than others. In an equitable organization, no one is denied access to the opportunity and power their peers enjoy. It is fitting that equity stands at the end of the ABIDE acronym, for equity is the goal. Accountability,

belonging, inclusion, and diversity are not ends in themselves; they matter especially because they make equity possible. Equity, like justice, nevertheless remains an elusive goal in a world that resists God's transformative presence, that answers back to progress with regression, and that clings to privilege rather than surrendering to love. It requires constant tending. Nevertheless, just as the witness of the biblical prophets underscores God's relentless commitment to justice and righteousness, those who abide with God are called to advocate, show solidarity, and foster agency for those who are denied opportunity or face oppression.

A Christian practice: Justice. Jesus Christ, to whom we belong in baptism and with whom we commune through our relationships with one another, calls us to be instruments of his radical love in the world. Our practices, like the gospel they embody, propel us beyond ourselves. We will not merely pray for justice; we must endeavor to do it. In Christ, God demonstrates love for the whole world; accordingly, our pursuit of just communities and systems occurs because we believe that all people should have opportunities to experience God's love. We never stop asking God and each other for healing from the lingering effects of past injustices. We hold ourselves accountable to persist in this vocation. Above all, we will remember that pursuing justice in response to God's leading demands a posture of deep humility from us all.