

Proposal to the Luther Seminary Board of Directors

Date: February 2022

Proposed by: The Diversity Committee of Student Council and Emmaus Student Organization

Adopted by the Student Council by unanimous vote, January 31, 2022

Purpose: To propose a long-term commitment to growth in the areas of LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion and anti-racism.

Background:

Luther Seminary has been striving for inclusion and equity for a long time, and the board has demonstrated a strong commitment to Accountability, Belonging, Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (ABIDE). Through conversations with the Admissions Office it is clear that one of the most common concerns that prospective students have when considering Luther is that we have not publicly committed to the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program. We are the largest ELCA seminary and the only ELCA seminary to have not yet made this commitment. However, Luther has never actively decided to not become RIC. Despite the fact that students raised this issue to the Student Affairs Committee in the past (Spring 2016), the board has never voted on it.

Some background on what it means to “become a Reconciling in Christ institution:” At its core, becoming an RIC seminary is a public declaration that we are committed to continual, intersectional growth, especially related to LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion and anti-racism. We, as Luther Seminary, claim in both our mission statement and our welcome statement that we are innovative, welcoming, inclusive, and committed to growth. However, as any prospective student can identify, there is little to no accountability on these issues, and the fact that we are not RIC signals to some that Luther is either indifferent or is actively opposed to intersectional justice and inclusion.

Luther Seminary has adopted the ABIDE document, adding ‘Accountability’ to our previous DEIB work. Becoming Reconciling in Christ is a necessary step in living into that accountability. If Reconciling Works, the organization that issues the RIC title, sees that Luther is not living into our welcome statement and our stated goals, they have the power to strip Luther of that title.

In the 2020/21 academic year, the Student Council ran a survey to identify what issues students prioritized and supported. 152 students responded to whether they thought that becoming RIC was important. Of those 152 students, 59% thought that becoming RIC was “very important” and only 11% thought that it was “not important.” On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “not important” and 5 is “very important,” the average response was over 4.

Proposal:

In the spirit of our community becoming more accountable to beloved LGBTQIA2S+ siblings and siblings of color, and because this issue is measurably important to alumni as well as current and prospective students, we propose that Luther Seminary commit to the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program.

We realize that this conversation will require additional time, but we must not continue to indefinitely postpone this topic. Deep and meaningful discussions about this decision can and should continue throughout our community and with our partners. For this reason, we respectfully recommend that the Luther Seminary Board of Directors vote unanimously to make Luther Seminary a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) Institution starting at the beginning of the Fall semester, 2024. That would allow space for any and all contributors to collaborate, plan, and prepare. By listening to concerns from both those advocating for and disagreeing with this commitment, Luther Seminary will ensure it remains passionately, actively, and inclusively committed to its mission and vision.

Reconciling in Christ Criteria and Assessment (what it takes to become RIC):

1. Your community explicitly states a welcome to people of "***all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions***" or "***LGBTQIA+***" and names its commitment to "***racial equity***" or "***anti-racism***" in its welcome statement.
The Luther Seminary welcome statement meets this requirement.
2. ***Open to calling*** an LGBTQIA+ and Black, Brown, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) Rostered Leader.
We must issue an official statement clarifying that we are open to this – suggested wording is included at the end of this proposal.
3. Will allow community space/sanctuary to be used for ***LGBTQIA+ weddings and blessings***.
We must also issue an official statement clarifying that we are open to this – suggested wording is included at the end of this proposal.
4. Will make a meaningful contribution annually to support the national RIC program.
The decision on what this looks like for Luther will be a point of conversation further on in the proposal.
5. This holy ministry is about living the journey by creating ongoing milestones to help you deepen and expand your community's welcome.
This can be part of ongoing ABIDE work that the board is already doing.

Responses to concerns about Reconciling in Christ:

- **Concern:** The title of Reconciling in Christ (RIC) is specifically associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and therefore makes Luther more exclusive rather than encouraging ecumenical students to attend.
- **Response:** We are named Luther Seminary, so it is no secret that we are a Lutheran institution. Any ecumenical siblings unwilling to attend Luther Seminary because we are associated with the ELCA have already decided not to join our community. Therefore, we do not believe that making this commitment will alienate any partners who are unwilling to attend a Lutheran institution. On the contrary, NOT being a Reconciling in Christ seminary is exclusive since it signals to the world that we are not committed to intersectional justice.
- **Concern:** Certain partners of the seminary may withdraw support if Luther Seminary commits to the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program because they have a more theologically conservative view of gender identity and sexual orientation.
- **Response:** This concern disappointingly assumes that either these partners are not aware that Luther Seminary already actively supports LGBTQIA2S+ siblings and supports anti-racism, or that Luther Seminary does not currently support LGBTQIA2S+ siblings and anti-racism efforts.

We currently claim, as an institution, that we welcome those who identify as any “race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic circumstance, dis/ability, political perspective, ecclesial tradition, and theological commitments.” This undoubtedly includes LGBTQIA2S+ people. Any partners of Luther Seminary, whether in a domestic or international capacity, should be readily aware of this comprehensive invitation. Students must even respond to the welcome statement as part of their applications. As a result, the Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program should not have any significant impact on these relationships. Further, if Luther is not welcoming to LGBTQIA2S+ people and / or people of color, then we need to address that.

Also, this is entirely speculative. We have no way of knowing how our partners will react, which is why we are proposing a period prior to becoming an RIC institution in which Luther Seminary can and should work closely with any and all partners who have concerns around this specific commitment. With its authority and access to networks and resources, this particular exchange should confidently and compassionately be led by our Board of Directors.

To our knowledge, Luther Seminary has never actively decided to not become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) institution. However, if Luther has made that decision, or does make that decision going forward, then this decision and the reasons for making such a decision

should be openly acknowledged to our community, including prospective / current students, faculty, and staff. Actively avoiding the discussion about becoming a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) community implies a lukewarm commitment to Luther Seminary's mission, vision, and welcome statements, as well as the ABIDE principles it has created and promoted.

Luther Seminary has a significant opportunity to publicly join the global movement that affirms that LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color are fully loved and fully included in God's world. Due to this shift, even in the absolute worst-possible case scenario where all of our theologically conservative partners migrate their support to other seminaries, we can still expect that the Spirit will work in unpredictable ways and that hopefully, in time, we can rebuild those relationships.

In the words of Amos 5:24, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (NRSV).

- **Concern:** We may lose donors if we become an RIC seminary.
- **Response:** This concern is valid, however, there is also a strong case that Luther Seminary may actually receive new donors if we became a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) community. Ultimately, we do not definitively know how this decision will impact donations, if at all. We should refrain from falling into any zero-sum or deficit thinking that is antithetical to the abundance of God's provision. In the words of Matthew's gospel: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (6:25-26, NRSV) Should donations unfortunately decrease, we should maintain a bold faith that God will provide.
- **Concern:** By not being RIC, we may have more of an opportunity to connect with partners who are theologically conservative. By bringing them to Luther, they may become more tolerant of LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color since, at Luther, we are elevating awareness and tolerance. This could help shift the global culture towards inclusion.
- **Response:** This is dishonest, does not align with our mission, vision, or welcome statements, and is harmful to all people involved. Pretending to be either more conservative or more inclusive than we actually are is dishonest, and in the process of trying to be everything to everyone, we will end up not being right for anyone.

We must be guided by our mission and vision statements. This is our mission: "*Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities called and sent by the Holy Spirit to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ and to serve in God's world.*" Preparing leaders for Christian communities in which there are LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color is part of our mission, but making conservative partners more progressive is not part of our mission.

One of the ways that religion can do significant harm is by making a claim and then living contrary to it. Doing so can leave communities feeling deceived and / or betrayed. Paul's letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the importance of being honest about who we are: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another" (4:25, NRSV).

- **Concern:** Luther Seminary should merely focus on preaching the gospel and not on social justice.
- **Response:** Being able to spread the gospel is precisely one of the reasons why being inclusive is so important. Jesus calls us to the work of justice and inclusion in Mark's gospel by proclaiming that we "... shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (12:30-31, NRSV). Any misrepresentation and / or abuse of Scripture to condemn and not love LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color alienates countless of our beloved community from being able to have a relationship with their Redeemer and Savior.

It is, in fact, precisely because of the gospel that we must do this work. The gospel of Jesus Christ is emphatically about social justice. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus began his own ministry by quoting Isaiah, saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Not only is this what the gospel calls us to do, but it is our mission as a seminary to prepare students for ministry. If our students leave without being able to speak intelligently and compassionately about LGBTQIA2S+ issues and race, they will not succeed in ministry in our current world. By taking a lukewarm stance on inclusion, we are modeling unhealthy behavior. If we at Luther are unable to take a stand for what is right, how can we expect our students to do so? By failing to model how to work through conflict and be an inclusive church, we are setting our students up for failure, and in turn, we are setting up their future ministries for failure.

Our vision statement says that "*The Holy Spirit calls Luther Seminary to lead faithful innovation for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing world.*" We are the last ELCA seminary to not be recognized as Reconciling in Christ. Although in some respects, we exemplify leadership for the sake of the gospel, our hesitancy to take significant steps towards ABIDE is hindering our students' ability to lead faithful innovation for the sake of the gospel.

Goal 3 of the ELCA Future Directions states that, as a denomination, we are committed to “addressing discrimination and oppression [by equipping and supporting] leaders at all levels of the church to understand, speak out, and act against discrimination based on race, gender, disability, sexual orientation and social status.” A key avenue for the ELCA to equip and support leaders is through the seminaries. Luther Seminary becoming a Reconciling in Christ community is a necessary step towards this goal of equity and diversity.

Finally, the first criteria of the Future Church design, affirmed by the ELCA Church Council, is to “Prioritize the engagement of new, young and diverse people.” This undeniably includes LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color. Luther, as the largest ELCA seminary, is currently hindering the feasibility of this goal, but we have the opportunity to instead be a leader of positive change. We could significantly contribute to this goal of equity, justice, and diversity by choosing to become a Reconciling in Christ institution. Matthew 25:40 reminds us that “...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Benefits of becoming an RIC seminary:

- It will be a visible and public commitment to continual growth.
- Help students, staff, and faculty of all genders and sexualities feel safe as part of our community at Luther Seminary.
- Create independent accountability and public acknowledgment of Luther Seminary’s ABIDE commitments and ongoing work.
- Live into our welcome statement with integrity.
- Prepare Luther graduates so that they will be able to respond to the diverse contexts they will encounter and will know how to support, include, and seek justice for LGBTQIA2S+ people and people of color in their various ministry callings.
- Embody Luther Seminary’s vision statement by taking a step towards faithful innovation in preaching the gospel to a rapidly changing world and by empowering students to preach the gospel in diverse spaces.
- Contribute to the Future Directions and Future Church design of the ELCA and contribute any similar ecumenical endeavors.

Resources required to implement the proposal:

- Becoming a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) institution is a commitment to continual growth. The Board of Directors already dedicates time at every meeting to working on ABIDE-related topics. In becoming a Reconciling in Christ seminary, we request that the administration and the Board continue to include LGBTQIA2S+ justice as well as anti-racism as important components of our ABIDE work. Specifically, this proposal

requests that there be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound goals established and / or reviewed at least annually related to these two issues.

- Part of this proposal is a commitment to making “*a meaningful contribution* annually to support the national RIC program.”

Recommendation to vote on:

We, as the Board of Directors of Luther Seminary, accept this proposal that Luther Seminary become a Reconciling in Christ institution starting at the beginning of the Fall semester, 2024. As part of this commitment, we affirm that we are open to calling, and will intentionally seek out LGBTQIA2S+ and Black, Brown, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) rostered and lay leaders for positions of leadership within the seminary. We also affirm that LGBTQIA2S+ people may be married in the Luther Seminary chapel, and that no person will be denied the ability to get married at Luther Seminary based on their gender identity, gender expressions, or sexual orientation. We commit an annual contribution of \$10,000 to the national Reconciling in Christ (RIC) program to further their ministry of justice and reconciliation. We will also include anti-racism and LGBTQIA2S+ justice as important components of our ABIDE work, and will annually establish and/or review specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound goals related to these two issues.

We recognize that not everyone will support this commitment. We will work to maintain past relationships as we continue to build new relationships prior to, during, and after the Fall semester of 2024.

Relevant resources:

<https://elca.org/Future-Directions/Goal3>

<https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8083>

<https://www.reconcilingworks.org/ric/aboutric/>

<https://www.luthersem.edu/about/welcome-statement/>

<https://www.luthersem.edu/about/mission-and-vision/>

Appendix A

Link to [“Why Becoming RIC Matters Video”](#)