



South Carolina Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last week Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary announced that it is planning to move from Columbia, South Carolina, to the main campus of Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina in January. The final approval of this move will come from the university's trustees later this month.

This is hard news for those of us who were formed on the campus in Columbia and for all those who have precious memories of those holy spaces and places. Even in the midst of sadness, however, I am giving thanks that our beloved seminary, which has a long history of pilgrimage, will go on to have a new chapter in Hickory.

I learned this news when Lenoir-Rhyne and LTSS leaders met with me to share their plan and ask for advice, and their reasons for the move are clear. By embedding the seminary on the campus in Hickory, Lenoir-Rhyne will save about \$2.1 million per year in operating costs and eliminate significant deferred maintenance costs on the Columbia campus. That campus is far larger than the seminary's current program requires, especially since, like other mainline seminaries, LTSS now enrolls many hybrid and commuter students. Online education opens to each of us all kinds of opportunities to continue our education from the comforts of our home office, but that reality has significant impact and brings real changes in the ways institutions like Southern Seminary can function when 75% or more of the student body is online. That's one major challenge, but also an incredible opportunity, because those online opportunities still exist for us as ways to continue our theological education and also to maintain connection to LTSS as we move into the future, regardless of where it is housed.

Lenoir-Rhyne University leaders have assured me that this is not downsizing or a change in the seminary's curriculum or strategic plan. In fact, by saving in operating costs, the seminary hopes to be able to expand its program in the years to come. I have been assured that all current full-time teaching and library faculty as well as full-time LTSS staff will be offered employment at the seminary in Hickory and will receive some assistance with relocation.

The library's collection will move to Hickory along with the seminary, and the seminary's Advisory Council and Alumni Board will help create thoughtful ways to integrate artifacts from the Columbia campus, including the library and chapel, in Hickory. Lenoir-Rhyne is prepared to invest in dedicated space for the seminary in Hickory and wants to develop those plans in conversation with faculty, staff, students and alumni.

I believe that LTSS in Hickory will offer important resources to the ELCA and to our synod. Embedding the seminary on a lively college campus will help it realize its goal of being a living laboratory for public ministry. In Hickory, seminary students will be able to build their capacity for ministry with classes in Spanish language and culture; business; counseling; environmental and health sciences; and other disciplines that provide context and grounding that our pastors urgently need. I look forward to visiting LTSS on a vibrant campus where leaders from our synod and beyond can participate in creative and robust lifelong learning opportunities.

The Rev. Dr. Chad Rimmer became LTSS's dean and rector last spring. Discussions about how to assure the seminary's sustainability were already underway when he arrived, and I have full confidence that he will

lead the seminary well through this transition. In a letter to LTSS Alumni on Friday, Dr. Rimmer framed the issue well. As LTSS's move to Hickory unfolds, I hope that you will join me in praying for the students, staff, faculty and alumni who are most deeply affected by the changes now underway.

LTSS will always hold a special place in my heart. This institution formed me into the pastor I am today. Paul and I were married in Christ Chapel, and like many of you, we hold that sacred space near and dear. While I hold the images of the Chapel and the buildings dear, it is the relationships that were formed in that place and that have continued throughout the years with classmates and professors that are most cherished in my heart and mind. Though the location of LTSS will be changing, it is the relationships from across the years (and across the generations) that will continue to hold fast. For this and so much more, I give thanks that the seminary we love so well will be around to form pastors and leaders for our congregations far into the future.

Thank you for your faithful leadership. Know that even as the church changes, God's love for us endures forever.

In Christ,

+The Rev. Virginia S. Aebischer, Bishop
ELCA - South Carolina Synod