

# The Charter of the Association of Teaching Theologians

April 2021

## Background

Since the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, its teaching theologians have gathered to deliberate on theological concerns related to the ministry and mission of the Church. Between 1988-2000, the bi-annual Convocation of Teaching Theologians met the mandate of the ELCA's governing documents which called for "regular convening of the teachers of the church." From the beginning, the "teachers of the church" included seminary faculty, ELCA colleges and university faculty, and ELCA members serving at non-ELCA institutions.

In response to a desire for more regular gatherings and for more control over the agenda of Convocation, the Association of Teaching Theologians was formed in 2000 with a Steering Committee elected to provide leadership between gatherings. Since then, the Association has facilitated an annual Convocation of Teaching Theologians in collaboration with the Domestic Mission program unit. The Association has also launched publishing partnerships and websites to share its work more broadly across the Church.

Throughout the history of the Convocation/Association, several tensions have been present. One, there has been ongoing debate whether or not to include rostered and lay leaders who teach part-time among the "teachers of the church." More recently, shifting patterns among faculty hiring, especially the use of contingent and administrative faculty, have further complicated those debates. Two, precisely who speaks for the Church on theological matters has been a debate. By default, this has usually fallen to the Conference of Bishops, however, at times the teaching theologians have sought to have great voice in the Church's theological discernment. Three, since the beginning the ELCA has sought to affirm a wide range of voices that contribute to its theological reflections; therefore an expansive definition of "theologian" has been valued.

Since 2013, there has been an ongoing conversation in the leadership of the Association about the future of the organization. In 2018, the Steering Committee accelerated plans for new governing documents to clarify its relationship to the ELCA and redefine its membership in ways that meet the needs of the Church and its theological work. In 2019, the Steering Committee appointed a Subcommittee on Constitutional Revision and asked that a proposal for new governing documents and membership categories be presented for a vote before the 2021 Convocation.

## Purpose

The Association of Teaching Theologians is a theological network and a ministry of the ELCA/ELCIC. The purposes of the Association are:

1. To facilitate discernment on theological matters of pressing importance to the ministry and mission of the ELCA/ELCIC.

- 37 2. To provide networking opportunities among teaching theologians serving at ELCA seminaries,  
38 colleges, and universities, among ELCA members serving at non-ELCA educational institutions,  
39 and among those serving in related programs which serve the ELCA's educational ministries.  
40 3. To provide support and networking for ELCA members in doctoral programs.  
41 4. To advocate throughout the Church for the Lutheran tradition's distinctive witness within faith-  
42 based university education, theological education, lay theological education, and public  
43 theology.

#### 44 **Membership**

45 Membership in the Association of Teaching Theologians is open to all who meet any of the following  
46 criteria:

- 47 1. Faculty—tenure-track, contingent, administrative, or research—serving at ELCA/ELCIC  
48 seminaries, colleges, and universities. Retired faculty are also eligible.  
49 2. ELCA/ELCIC members serving as faculty—tenure-track, contingent, administration, or research—  
50 at non-ELCA educational institutions. Retired faculty are also eligible.  
51 3. ELCA/ELCIC members who have completed advanced theological training (usually a PhD/ThD)  
52 and who are vocationally engaged in a ministry of teaching; or those currently preparing for  
53 such vocations through doctoral programs.

54 Those who meet the criteria for membership should apply to the Membership Secretary of the  
55 Association through the website. Every five years, the Association will send out a notice of membership  
56 renewal.

#### 57 **Leadership**

58 The Association will be led by a Steering Committee whose members are elected at the Business  
59 Meeting session at the annual Convocation of Teaching Theologians. The composition of the Steering  
60 Committee will be:

- 61 • 10 members at large  
62 • A representative from the Conference of Bishops  
63 • A doctoral student liaison

64 The Association will collaborate with the Churchwide Organization and therefore will welcome staff  
65 members to serve on the Steering Committee as advisory members, including:

- 66 • Director of Theological Formation  
67 • Executive Director, ELCA Colleges and Universities  
68 • Director of Theological Diversity, Ecumenical, & Inter-faith Relations

69 This charter calls on the membership of the Association to live into the ELCA's commitment for  
70 authentic diversity in its elections of leaders. Any member of the Association is eligible for elected  
71 leadership on the Steering Committee. Terms to the Steering Committee will be three-years and  
72 staggered for the purpose of consistency. The Steering Committee will elect among its members a Chair  
73 and a Membership Secretary and it may appoint subcommittees as it sees fit. The Steering Committee  
74 will also elect representatives to the ELCA Theological Roundtable and, every three years, to the  
75 Churchwide Assembly.

76 **Program**

77 The primary programmatic work of the Association will be to plan and host an annual Convocation of  
78 Teaching Theologians (ELCA Constitution, section 15.12.G16 “Responsibility for Theological  
79 Discernment,” Office of the Presiding Bishop). The Association will extend its contributions to the  
80 theological discernment of the Church by developing platforms for publishing and other forms of public  
81 theology. The Association will support ELCA/ELCIC members in doctoral programs by extending full  
82 membership to them and encouraging their participation in its Convocation.

83 The Convocation of Teaching Theologians is funded by the Churchwide Organization and limited to 50-  
84 60 funded participants. Funded participation is on a first-come-first serve basis or by another process  
85 determined by the Steering Committee. Any member may attend, and the Steering Committee makes  
86 every effort to keep the registration fee as cost-effective as possible.

87 **Communication**

88 The Association promotes and communicates its contributions to the theological discernment of the  
89 ELCA and ELCIC through its website, social media platforms, and a newsletter for its membership.

90 **Relationship to the Churchwide Organization**

91 As a theological network of the Church, the Association contributes to the Church’s theological  
92 discernment, provides feedback on social statements and other theological matters as requested by the  
93 Churchwide Organization, and offers further opportunities for the Church in all its expressions to have  
94 access to those serving as “teachers of the church.” The Association primarily relates to the ELCA’s  
95 Churchwide Organization through collaborations with the Director of Theological Diversity, Ecumenical  
96 & Inter-faith Relations, the Director for Formation Leadership, Seminaries, and Lay Schools and the  
97 Executive Director of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. The primary liaison shall be  
98 appointed by the Office of the Presiding Bishop and shall have budgetary oversight.

99 **Funding**

100 The Association is historically funded through the budget overseen by the Director for Formation  
101 Leadership. Historically, the Churchwide Organization has covered the travel and housing expenses of  
102 the Convocation. The Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities has also provided grants in support of  
103 the Convocation. Educational institutions hosting the Convocation often provide grant or in-kind support  
104 of the Association.

105 **Evaluation & Review**

106 Evaluation of the Association of Teaching Theologians will occur every five years facilitated by the  
107 Steering Committee in collaboration with relevant staff in the Churchwide Organization. The evaluation  
108 should invite input by the entire membership of the Association. Evaluation will be based on the extent  
109 to which the Association has fulfilled its purpose, met the needs of the ministry and mission of the ELCA  
110 and ELCIC, and served its membership.