

A Time to Build

“IT’S TIME.”

Not long after Johannes Bading was called to serve as synod president in 1860, he began to speak of the importance of establishing a confessional Lutheran seminary. Relying on the European mission societies to provide the necessary faithful Lutheran pastors was not a workable solution in the long term. The Wisconsin Synod needed a more reliable source of gospel servants. Though the synod wasn’t exactly swimming in money in 1862, President Bading contended the time had come. God’s people agreed. Trusting the Lord to bless, the synod began operating a seminary in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1863 with one student. Two years later, when the school that ultimately came to be known as Northwestern College was constructed, seminary classes were taught on that campus.

After operating the seminary in various places in the 1870s and 1880s, the synod decided that they needed to do something better. It was time to build a stand-alone seminary. Increased enrollment was a factor. All involved wanted to support the men preparing for service in Christ’s church and to give them the best training possible. Construction began in 1892 and the new seminary, located in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, was dedicated to the glory of God in 1893.

A little more than twenty-five years later, however, most agreed they needed to do better. It was time to find a new location for the seminary. Not only did the building in Wauwatosa need significant repairs and expansion, but there was also precious little space on campus for recreation and no room at all to build homes for professors. In addition, the synod did not own the land on which the seminary was built. Two properties were purchased and sold in the 1920s before ultimately deciding on a third property, a nearly eighty-acre farm in Thiensville (now Mequon), Wisconsin, as the best option for a new seminary.

Those involved in the process were committed to constructing a building that would last, so that the synod could have a settled place for its pastor-training institution. Above all, they were committed to doing their very best for the Lord who loved them and purchased them with his blood. They aspired to provide a beautiful campus for the students and first-rate facilities to promote excellent training for pastoral ministry.

Our forebears succeeded. The Mequon campus has served the synod well for nearly one hundred years. Almost 3,300 men have completed their preparation for pastoral ministry on the campus. The place is as beautiful as ever. More than one person has described it as living and studying in a park—a wonderful environment for students and professors alike.



As spectacular as the campus is and as well as the building constructed in 1929 has served our church body, it’s time to build. We can do better for the men preparing to serve as pastors in Christ’s church.

IT’S TIME TO BUILD NEW CLASSROOMS

A few of the current classrooms are in the basement. They do not have the natural light that supports student learning. The basement classrooms often smell like a Wisconsin basement, with a mustiness that is occasionally overpowering. When heavy rains come, some of the basement classrooms take on water, and the mustiness increases. That’s hardly an ideal environment for learning.

The current classrooms served well in a previous generation, when most of the classes were lecture-based. Students sat in individual desks and faced the front of the classroom, ready to receive instruction. The professors presented material, wrote important things on the chalkboard (or overhead or whiteboard), and the students dutifully took notes and asked clarifying questions. Space to move around wasn’t needed, because the only movement was students coming into class at the beginning of the hour and leaving at the end.

The current classrooms don’t work as well for the collaborative learning common today, where students engage in small-group discussion based on material shared with them. Larger classrooms would allow tables to be set up in pods, facilitating those important discussions. The more opportunities students have to express the truths of Scripture and apply them to a situation, the better equipped they will be as pastors to speak God’s Word clearly and faithfully to the people the Lord calls them to serve. Small-group conversations give every student a chance to participate. Those who might rarely volunteer thoughts in a large group more readily engage in the smaller group.

When the seminary was built in 1929, no one was thinking about students having laptops on their desk and needing access to electricity. At present, cords are seemingly everywhere on the floor in the classrooms. The students and professors who consider themselves agile appreciate the chance to demonstrate their ability to navigate the makeshift obstacle course. Others fear that they will trip over cords, causing computers to fall or coffee mugs to crash to the floor. Add in the backpacks and books stored on the floor and professors are hesitant to walk around the room to try to listen in on small-group discussions.

The new education center will have six classrooms, all with ample natural light. The two classrooms on the first floor will be significantly larger than any of the current classrooms, easily able to accommodate 45 students. Generally, courses are taught in smaller sections, but that's in part because classroom space didn't allow consideration of a different approach. The four classrooms on the second floor will be larger than most of the current classrooms and will allow for tables to be set up in pods or rows, depending on the course and the instructor's preference. Outlets will be available beneath tables to address the concern with electrical cords.

The new education center will also address a need identified in the strategic planning process: small-group meeting space. Currently, there are no obvious places for a group of four to six students to collaborate on a project or to meet with a professor, for instance, to work on a text study in preparation for writing a sermon. The new education center includes five study alcoves to support that kind of group learning.



IT'S TIME TO BUILD A STUDENT LOUNGE

One of the blessings we experienced during the 2020–21 school year when COVID protocols required the moving of morning worship from the chapel to the auditorium was the time both before and after the service for informal conversation, whether between students or between students and faculty.

The building project promises to provide a natural place for that. The project calls for transforming a portion of the current library into a comfortable student lounge, complete with a fireplace and a coffee bar. That area will serve as the pass-through from the chapel to the new education center. Every day, immediately after morning chapel, students, faculty, and staff will spend time in that space interacting with one another and developing relationships. Pastoral ministry is all about engaging people and forming relationships; this lounge area will provide a place to work on those skills.

IT'S TIME TO BUILD A GATHERING HALL

Seminary students have always appreciated the opportunity to strengthen the ties with their brothers in faith who will be their brothers in ministry. Those relationships develop in the classroom, in the dormitory, in the dining hall, and in regular get-togethers held in the dormitory basement. While quaint and workable, the basement is more than a bit cramped. It may work for seminary students, but it's not particularly inviting for the students' wives, who have no other place on campus to meet. A century ago, when the seminary was built, students were not allowed to be married. Now about half of the students are married.

A new spacious gathering hall attached to the current auditorium will provide a much more natural place for wives (and their children) to get together. With high



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IT'S TIME TO INVEST

The total cost of the project, including the furniture, fixtures, and equipment, is approximately \$15.6 million.

That's not a trifling amount. Call it a significant investment in the gospel ministry. We're following in the footsteps of the saints who went before us, who were committed to building something that would be a blessing well into the future.

Christ's self-giving love compels us to give the Lord our best as we seek to support the spread of the life-giving gospel throughout the world. Christ's astounding love compels us to do our best for the men who want to be trained well for pastoral ministry, that they might be the best instruments they can be in the Lord's hand.

As we, as a synod, make this important investment in gospel ministry, we are making a statement to the young people of our church body. We are testifying both to our love for the public ministry of the gospel and to our commitment to prepare pastors who are well-equipped for ministry in the twenty-first century.

To this point the saints have offered gifts and commitments over \$8 million. The seminary's governing board has authorized the use of up to \$3 million of seminary funds on the project but would love to be able to use those dollars on other needed projects, like air conditioning in the dormitory, for instance. We are praying that God's people will consider it a privilege to participate in this project and thus assist in the preparation of pastors who will preach and teach God's saving truths in places they may never see. For more information, contact Sean Young, director of mission advancement, at sean.young@wls.edu or 262-242-8179.

ceilings, comfortable seating, and lots of natural light, the gathering hall will be a great area for student wives to spend time with one another. They will never have to feel that they are intruding on the dormitory students' home. That will be a blessing in several ways. As wives develop relationships with one another, they will be able to support each other in the busy years of seminary life. The more supported they feel, the more they will be able to support their husbands and encourage them to continue on the path to ministry. Relationships developed while at the seminary will also be a natural source of support when they are serving as pastors' wives in the future.

IT'S TIME TO BUILD ON-SITE OFFICES FOR PROFESSORS

All the men serving on the seminary faculty have served as pastors in congregations and mission fields across the synod. They are pastors by training and pastors at heart. They desire to model ministry for students and "pastor" them on the way to full-time service in the church. That requires regularly interacting with students both formally and informally, in the classroom and outside of it. On-site offices will foster that kind of mentoring and modeling. Professors won't have to go looking for spaces to meet privately with students; they will have offices available to them. Students, who are more eager than previous generations to have relationships with their professors and to be actively mentored for ministry, will know where to find faculty members for private conversation. The time that students and professors spend together will have an impact far beyond the walls of the seminary, as men leave the campus ready to serve God's people.

On-site offices will also facilitate collaboration among professors. They will be more readily available for conversation with their colleagues both during the class day and in the afternoons. That collaboration will increase their understanding of God's Word, stimulate them to an even deeper study of Scripture, and enhance their classroom instruction. The time professors spend in regular discussion with brothers on the faculty will nurture an even greater appreciation for the privilege of working together to form pastors for Christ's flock. Once the education center has been completed, the classrooms on the main floor and the second floor of the main building will be converted into on-site offices.

Construction began immediately after the school year concluded. If all goes according to plan, the education center, gathering hall, and student lounge will be completed in April 2027. The faculty offices will be completed by August 2027.

It's time to build, for the glory of God, the benefit of the students, and the blessing of those the students will one day serve as pastors. †

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