

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION #1 (CONGREGATIONS)  
AND THE RESOURCES OF THE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION NETWORK**

The 1995 *Study of Theological Education* committed the ELCA's seminaries to intensify the focus of their resources and efforts on the task of preparing graduates to serve as leaders with sharpened capacities to understand congregations and their concrete mission challenges. It also called on the seminaries to provide more lifelong learning opportunities in more modes for wider audiences of lay leaders. Both of these commitments have required our schools to relate more closely to congregations in their diverse and rapidly changing contexts. As a result:

\*Contextual education has moved even more to the center of seminary curricula, becoming not only key to student learning but also a crucial way for seminaries to learn from and resource congregations. Both the churchwide *Horizon* program and individual seminary initiatives aim to take advantage of the most distinctive feature of Lutheran theological education—internship—in order to improve the work of the schools and to serve congregational renewal.

\*Faculty research focused on better understanding congregations and their contexts has expanded and deepened, creating a growing body of knowledge and a widening circle of conversation on topics of missional importance. A large number of seminary programs and institutes have sprung up to gather and share widely what is being learned in congregations.

\*Seminaries are multiplying distance learning offerings in various modes, including:

- faculty travel to extension sites
- print resources
- live and recorded video
- seminary, cluster and individual faculty websites
- online courses

Equally if not even more significantly, the seminaries through their three clusters are enlisting colleges, camps, synodical lay schools, continuing education centers and other educational providers as partners in a *theological education network* which has a much greater capacity to resource congregational educational programs, synodical lay schools and individual lifelong learning which serves congregational mission.

\*A significant number of congregations have moved into closer partnership with seminaries, developing an identity as “teaching congregations” in which lifelong learning moves to the center of congregational life.

\*Through the creation of structures such as *Fisher's Net*, *Centered Life-Centered Work*, *SELECT* and consultations of network partners convened by the Eastern Cluster, Covenant Cluster and Western Mission Cluster, the seminaries are creating new networking capacity through which congregations can be more active in resourcing each other. **In this way, the ELCA theological education network can serve as a means of connecting congregations more closely together, enabling them to better live out their call to be “generous, sharing the mind of Christ.”**