

United Lutheran Seminary fires president

Theresa F. Latini led an organization that taught that sexuality could be changed. She now rejects that—but students, faculty, and alumni charged her and the board with keeping that fact secret.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [April 11, 2018](#) issue



Theresa F. Latini. Photo courtesy of United Lutheran Seminary.

Less than a year after being created by combining two seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Lutheran Seminary in Pennsylvania fired its president. Eight members of its board of trustees have also recently resigned.

On March 14 [the board wrote to constituents](#) about its decision to ask Theresa F. Latini to leave, explaining that “the ongoing controversy surrounding her naming as

president made it extremely difficult to overcome the issues related to trust as the president of this institution.”

The day before, [Latini released a letter addressing concerns](#) that had been raised in public conversations at the seminary in late February and early March. Latini acknowledged a primary issue for many: that in the 1990s she had directed an organization—formed by members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—that “believed and taught that sexual orientation change was possible to varying degrees for some, if not many, LGBTQIA+ persons seeking to live in accordance with the former ‘fidelity and chastity’ standard” then in effect in the PCUSA. She also stated: “I profoundly regret my work in this organization. . . . I completely reject any and all other attempts to change one’s own or another person’s sexual orientation.”

Latini became an advocate for full inclusion of people of all sexualities and genders in the church and the academy in the past 12 years, she wrote.

Elise Brown, the seminary board chair, knew about Latini’s prior involvement with the organization during the presidential search but did not share it with the rest of the search committee, according to [local news reports](#). That information came to light recently. Students, alumni, faculty, and staff were concerned both about Latini’s past and about what they saw as a lack of transparency in her selection, [Pennsylvania news sources reported](#).

Seminary faculty [wrote in a public letter on March 19](#): “We lament that our president did not fully disclose her employment history prior to taking her call, and we lament that our administration repeatedly kept this damaging secret. These actions did not model the public theology that we seek to teach and learn.”

Brown was among the board members who resigned before the March 14 board meeting, the trustees wrote.

“We are aware that many of you will applaud our choices, while many others will be bitterly disappointed,” the board wrote after that meeting. “We ask that you recognize on good faith that we did our best to take all into full account as we endeavored to find the best answer for ULS.”

Latini told [news reporters in central Pennsylvania](#) that she believed she had been “scapegoated by a historically divided institution resistant to unification.”

Early in 2016, administrators of the two seminaries that formed ULS had planned to close both schools and dramatically reshape the resulting institution—including ending tenure-track faculty positions, [G. Jeffrey MacDonald reported for Religion News Service](#). That plan turned out not to be feasible because of state accreditation rules.

The search for a president of the combined school had begun in fall 2016 and continued until spring 2017 with the selection of Latini, an ordained minister in the PCUSA, which has an official agreement with the ELCA allowing for partnership in ministry and mission.

Latini began her time as president last July when the school reopened, describing itself as “a consolidation of two seminaries,” with campuses at Gettysburg and Philadelphia. Tracing its history through predecessor schools and denominations back to 1826, ULS considers itself to be the oldest seminary in the ELCA.

Moving forward, the seminary plans to increase availability of pastoral care, counseling, and behavioral health services from providers outside the institution and hire a specialist to attend to “healing, justice, and reconciliation.” It will also conduct a “full outside audit focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion” at the school.

James Dunlop, bishop of the ELCA’s Lower Susquehanna Synod, will be acting president while continuing to serve as bishop. The board wrote that it planned to begin a search for an interim president, “and we commit to as transparent a process as is possible while still meeting legal requirements for privacy.”

A version of this article, which was edited on April 3 to clarify the description of the organization Latini led in the 1990s, appears in the print edition under the title “United Lutheran Seminary fires president.”