

Luther Seminary to pilot two-year M.Div.

The M.Div.X program hopes to train innovative church leaders—with no student debt, says seminary president Robin J. Steinke.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [August 15, 2018](#) issue



Robin J. Steinke

Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, has received a \$21.4 million donation for a five-year pilot of an accelerated Master of Divinity program.

Students in the program, M.Div.X for short, will finish their degree in 24 months, studying full-time year-round. The congregational internship will occur throughout the two years, rather than in a separate year as is currently required by the school. And students will not have summers off—a custom that was based on an agrarian calendar, according to Robin J. Steinke, Luther president.

Dean Buntrock, the founder and former CEO of Waste Management, Inc., and a supporter of Lutheran higher education, made the donation, which will cover full tuition and some living expenses for students, costs for a year of planning, and resources to add faculty and staff.

“This pilot project is designed to inspire and support innovative leadership development churchwide,” Buntrock said in a statement. “It is also my hope that others in the church will step up and ensure the long-term and broad sustainability of education for our church.”

Buntrock “really wanted to make a difference” in supporting the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with which Luther Seminary is affiliated, Steinke said, “but being a businessman he wanted to give in a sustainable way.” Elizabeth A. Eaton, ELCA presiding bishop, said in a statement that “identifying, inviting, equipping, and supporting leaders is one of the highest priorities for our work in the ELCA.”

Luther Seminary is currently in the first year of planning. The first cohort of 30 students would arrive in fall 2019, with additional cohorts of 30 beginning in the two consecutive years following that.

Luther plans to spread the knowledge gained from the pilot and assessments throughout the five years. “We want to share this with anyone that has ears to hear,” Steinke said.

Some students will continue with the usual three-and-a-half-year M.Div. program while the M.Div.X pilot is taking place. “That’s part of why the cost is so high,” she said.

High costs for seminary education have been a concern at Luther for some time. For 15 years, Luther has been providing financial coaches for students and trying to keep student debt for graduates down.

“The good news was we had reduced the level of indebtedness of graduates, adjusted for inflation,” Steinke said. “Half of our students graduated with no debt. The bad news was the average level of debt was still \$40,000.”

Luther also found that a lot of congregations could not afford first-call pastors and pay them a livable wage.

The goal of the M.Div.X pilot is to be innovative in educating leaders who are free “to lead in ways that might be counterintuitive,” Steinke said. “It’s really hard to figure out what God’s Holy Spirit is doing in the world when you’re trying to make your next student loan payment.”

A version of this article, which was edited July 27 to reflect that the program does not need reaccreditation, appears in the print edition under the title “Luther Seminary will experiment with offering 24-month M.Div. program.”