

Loehe's Legacy and the Apostolic Calling of Wartburg Theological Seminary for the Church and World in the 21st Century¹

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Neuendettelsau? A place Wilhelm Loehe never desired to live, commenting that he would not even want his dog to be buried there. Yet this village has become to this day a center for the gathering and sending of “apostles” for mission to the global church. These are the two central impulses of the Loehe legacy and the apostolic calling of Wartburg Theological Seminary in the 21st century: 1) gathering for life together in the worshipping, teaching, and learning community and 2) being sent forth from this community in witness and service to others for the life of the world.

What is the attraction and ongoing significance of the Loehe legacy? Seven core characteristics demonstrate remarkable continuity between the vision and practice of Wilhelm Loehe, the nineteenth-century pastor, and the life of WTS in its more than 160 years of history.

First, the Loehe legacy is *worship-centered*. Loehe reformed liturgical practice according to historic forms and renewed worship for the church in the 19th century, understanding that in worship God was at work accomplishing God’s mission for the life of the world. At WTS worship remains the centering practice of our life together in Jesus Christ.

Second, *the* Loehe legacy is *communal*. Loehe gathered people around worship into a community of life-giving relationships that stretched from Neuendettelsau to the ends of the earth. At WTS each new generation of students is initiated into bonds of friendship that are formed in life together of mutual conversation around worship, community, and classroom and that leads to a sending into witness and service to others.

Third, the Loehe legacy is rooted in *Lutheran pietism*. Loehe was deeply committed both to the Lutheran confessional heritage and to Christianity as a living faith. Wartburg Theological Seminary holds together two impulses that are often rent asunder in the life of the church: commitment to historic Lutheranism, centered on justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, and the expression of this faith in personal faith and integrity through lives devoted to justice.

Fourth, the Loehe legacy allows for *open questions*. While Loehe held core Lutheran commitments to justification as articulated in Scripture and the confessional writings, he also maintained an ecclesiology that allowed Christians to have different opinions on non-essential matters. At WTS this characteristic has fostered a way of being church that is clear about ultimate matters but respectful of difference in penultimate matters.

Fifth, the Loehe legacy is *diaconal*. Loehe founded in Neuendettelsau a host of diaconal institutions to serve the needs of the most vulnerable members of society. WTS has prepared

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students for diaconal service not only as pastors but as deaconesses, diaconal ministers, chaplains, associates in ministry, and active laity, always with an eye on service to the needs of others.

Sixth, the Loehe legacy is *missional*. For Loehe, worship and community life were never ends in themselves, but rather the centering activity for being sent into the world in service to God's mission. WTS understands itself as serving God's mission by sending leaders forth from its communal formation process as leaders for faith communities who "proclaim and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world created for communion with God and in need of personal and social healing."

Seventh, the Loehe legacy is *global*. Although located in the out-of-the-way setting of Neuendettelsau, Loehe cultivated a global vision of God's mission, reaching out to North America, Australia, Brazil, Tanzania, and Papua New Guinea. WTS continues to cultivate a global ministry by receiving, preparing, and sending students from and for the global church.

The WTS' Mission Statement articulates well how the Loehe legacy continues to come alive in the school: *Wartburg Theological Seminary serves the mission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by being a worship-centered community of critical theological reflection where learning leads to mission and mission informs learning. Within this community, Wartburg educates women and men to serve the church's mission as ordained and lay leaders. This mission is to proclaim and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ to a world created for communion with God and in need of personal and social healing.* Our mission statement is known and shared by all the members of this community; it focuses the purpose of our life together. The Twelve Pastoral and Diaconal Practices further articulate the shape of the WTS' curriculum and formation process in fulfilling our mission.

The WTS' "way" of forming valued leaders involves the fostering of intentional relationships among students, faculty, and staff in life together through worship, convocations, student-advisor interactions, faculty team-teaching, small-group pedagogy, J-term immersions, contextual education, and community life. The Wartburg "way" has received enthusiastic affirmation through both reaccreditation reports from the school's accrediting agencies *and* the practice of assessment undertaken by the seminary. ELCA bishops and churchwide leaders especially affirm the values of ecclesial partnership, collegiality, and reading context as fostered by the communal formation process of WTS. The mission of WTS closely relates times of *gathering* as teaching and learning community and the *sending* forth into witness to and service of God's mission in the world.

The mission frontier of the 21st century presents new and dramatic challenges to the Loehe legacy as WTS seeks to respond faithfully and effectively to its apostolic calling. It is imperative that "learning leads to mission and mission informs learning" abides as the central feature of Wartburg's apostolic calling as it considers new partnerships and unprecedented changes across the landscape of theological education. WTS has been a school located in the heartland of the United States, which has in each generation claimed a global scope for its mission. It has been a center for gathering together gifted people, joining them to worship-centered community, grounding them in biblical and theological wisdom, and sending them forth as valued leaders at God's mission frontiers. Those Wartburg Theological Seminary sends forth as missionaries

(Sendlinge) from this place of formation are equipped with a theology centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, steeped in biblical wisdom, sharing a global vision, demonstrating a spirit of collegiality, breadth of hospitality, skills in collaborative leadership, and a deep commitment to the mission of the Triune God in the world.