

Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

Strategic Plan 2015-2020: Jubilee

Adopted by the Board of Trustees October 21, 2014

Who We Are

Many a visitor to Union is surprised by what they see when they first walk through our doors. On the outside, our imposing stone walls and gargoyles easily suggest that what goes on inside must involve weighty, ancient matters. Such an impression is not wrong—the religious and spiritual topics taught at Union are as formidable as the gothic walls that house our classes. But this impression doesn't tell the full story. Just inside our walls lies a spacious courtyard, where on a summer's day birdsong drowns out the noise from Broadway. Here, the world feels open, inviting, and as changing as the seasons displayed by the New York City sky above.

This odd combination of sturdy walls and open space describes not only Union's physical space; it also captures the spirit of its community. Our students herald from neighborhoods as close as Harlem and as far as India, and they claim faith traditions ranging from Baptist to Buddhist to the blessedly undefined. Their questions and passions are as diverse as the faculty that teach them: philosophers, critics, artists, theologians, scripture scholars, poets, and preachers, and they aim towards professions that stretch from the local parishes and urban streets to the halls of power and the spotlights of public life.

Sturdy and open also describe the spirit of the unique form of theological education that happens here. We are a seminary that teaches the critical skills of disciplined thinking along with the deeper abilities of love, care, and community building. We believe that classroom learning and community-based knowledge are equally important, and we cherish concrete practices as much as abstract theory, strength as much as vulnerability, and certainty as much as informed doubt. In all of this, we are committed to helping students become the leaders – pastors, prophets, public servants – who can serve the world's needs, leaders both wise and loving, both courageous and gentle. As one recent graduate described it, "Union grows ministers and social justice leaders with big hearts and a big faith and who are ready to take on a big world."

These distinctive marks of a Union education are captured well in our 2011 mission statement:

Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York is a seminary and a graduate school of theology established in 1836 by founders "deeply impressed by the claims of the world upon the church." Union prepares women and men for committed lives of service to the church, academy, and society. A Union education develops practices of mind and body that foster intellectual and academic excellence, social justice, and compassionate wisdom. Grounded in the Christian tradition and responsive to the needs of God's creation, Union's graduates make a difference wherever they serve.

Within the realm of theological education, Union has a reputation for engaging contemporary issues with incisive thinking and an innovative spirit. That spirit of innovation has never been more alive than it is today.

Shaping Our 2020 Strategic Priorities

In 2011, Union's Board of Trustees adopted a new strategic plan entitled, "A Stronger, Global Union." Its task was to figure out innovative ways for Union to respond to massive shifts occurring on the global religious landscape. Among the shifts noted was the dramatic decline in the membership within

mainline churches in North America and a correlative decline in the number of students seeking a seminary education aimed at traditional pulpit ministries; the rise of religiously unaffiliated young people who are not necessarily pulpit-bound but nonetheless remain interested in spirituality and social justice; the decline in academic religious studies positions that, similarly, created a decline in enrollments in traditional doctoral programs. The plan reflected as well on the dizzying rate of technological innovation, the rise of online learning opportunities, the unprecedented growth of multi-religious communities in the US, and the increasing need, in our global urban centers, to address social justice concerns related to economic inequality, immigration, racism, and growing violence against women.

What did the 2011 Strategic Plan suggest Union do in response to these changes? Two responses were central: it reaffirmed Union's commitment to growing a diverse community of learners and teachers, at all levels of diversity, and it encouraged Union to continue to strengthen its social justice-oriented programming.

We have accomplished a great deal: we maintained a healthy-sized student body at a time when many seminaries have seen decreases, and our incoming classes are increasingly diverse; we recruited leading, diverse academics to our faculty in the fields of theology, philosophy, ethics, and Bible. We created a new interdisciplinary field of study devoted to "Interfaith Engagement" and launched a creative, new *Women's Interfaith Residency* program; we implemented academic assessment strategies that demonstrate a high degree of curricular effectiveness among our Master of Divinity (M.Div.) students, and we have used this data to sharpen our programs; we have diversified our field education options to include more opportunities for internships within non-traditional ministerial settings; we expanded our courses that provide students with practical leadership skills for religious, non-profit, and other settings; we underwent a campus-wide technological renovation; we worked hard on refurbishing our facility and strengthening our fund-raising; we created a new administrative position devoted to supporting diversity; and we officially launched the public platform called the "Union Forum" to house a growing collection of institutes and student-focused, social justice initiatives.

While this is a strong list of accomplishments, it doesn't capture some of the most significant transformations occurring in the life of the school. In 2014, over a quarter of our incoming class claimed no religious affiliation. The spiritual-but-not-religious are coming in droves, and much more quickly than we expected. During that same period, we have seen a surge of student interest in interfaith engagement. Our new interfaith field is now our second most popular field, with 20% of our student body taking degrees in that concentration. Moreover, our historically small, two-year Master of Arts (non-ordination) program has tripled in size over the past four years. We had not expected that level of growth in this non-ministerial area. Similarly, we have been experimenting with more intentional forms of community in our residence halls – and the students are eager for even more opportunities to do this.

In addition to these internal shifts, we have been surprised by the levels of interest that our non-degree, public programs continue to generate. In July of 2014, we hosted a summer program for millennial activists that was wildly successful (four hundred applications for thirty-eight places) suggesting that a new generation of young leaders find Union a hospitable place to learn and grow. In September of 2014, we hosted Religions for the Earth, an international conference on climate change that drew large crowds, received international press coverage, and raised expectations with respect to the role Union might play in developing this theologically rich and urgent topic. We have also become the center of national conversations about theology and economics, based on a series we hosted on this topic over the past two years, and have started a program for Christian clergy in New York who are interested in

social justice issues; they, too, are excited and want more.

Given our achievements and new learning, in 2013 we decided it was time to update the 2011 Plan, push it forward, and commit ourselves to even more rigorously reimagining the future of Union and of theological education. Based on what we now know, more students are not ordination bound and need skills related to non-profit leadership. We also know that even our ordination-bound students need the same organizational and change-creating skills for work in congregations. Because of this, we want to consider expanding our course offerings in the skills that are needed by leaders of organizations and movements. We are clear that Union is a healthy institution with a grand tradition to build upon and an innovative academic program that is ready to take on the pressing issues of our time. Our time is now.

We present this new 2014 Strategic Plan, giving it a new *six-year scope* that extends it into the next decade. The plan is intended to supersede “A Stronger, Global Union” in that it restates the goals from that document that have yet to be accomplished, while embedding them within a new set of priorities. By implementing this revised plan, we believe Union will be the institution that it wants to be in 2020, and beyond: **an educationally and financially innovative seminary that is shaping religious scholarship for a new century, cultivating intentional community, and leveraging its voice to reimagine faith in the public square.**

In this plan, we identify several areas of growth about which we are excited. One need, however, stands above all others, in terms of urgency and importance. Many students who are now seeking out Union do not have the resources to attend. Because of this, we have come to see the creation of financial access to seminary education as an issue of justice. Seminary provides people the opportunity to align their spiritual, ethical, religious, and moral lives with their professional ones. All people should have this opportunity, but—due to limited time and finances—most do not or must incur debilitating debt during seminary that undermines their chances to pursue transformative careers post-seminary. Union is pursuing innovation, particularly financial and educational innovation, in order to make Union’s unique seminary experience available to as many people as possible and enable them to graduate with the economic freedom to pursue innovative and entrepreneurial vocations.

The Biblical theme of Jubilee captures this spirit. It is a biblical vision of periodic restoration of ancestral lands to people who lost them in crisis, freeing of people enslaved because of debt, and letting the land rest from constant farming. Our strategic vision for the future, building on our historic legacy, is to seek economic freedom for our students, for our institution itself, and for the broader world characterized by wealth inequality and environmental debts that future generations must pay.

For the 2015 through the 2020 academic years, this is our Jubilee plan:

1. Shaping 21st Century Religious Scholarship

Union has long been a leader in the world of religious scholarship. From Delores Williams to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Reinhold Niebuhr to Dorothee Sölle, James Cone to Beverly Harrison, Union has been home to countless revolutionaries in the fields of religion, history, and spirituality. As Union considers the future of religious scholarship, the Seminary must ensure that the legacy of academic excellence and field-shaping scholarship continues well into the 21st century and beyond.

Support and Develop Faculty

Recruit leading academics who are breaking new ground in traditional disciplines and in interdisciplinary studies; hire new members commensurate with student growth, while maintaining a maximum student-faculty ratio of 18 to 1 in accordance with Association of Theological Schools standards;

Support faculty research and professional development;

Work to develop faculty proficiency in the latest pedagogical methods and educational technologies, including proficiency in teaching online.

Operation Plan:

Encourage and financially support collaboration in interdisciplinary projects and development of interdisciplinary courses;

Create a faculty development program, including support in grant writing;

Develop and implement a plan for faculty training in digital education and technology and for continuing instructional design and technology support;

Encourage and incentivize the teaching of innovative courses, including courses taught online, in whole or in part.

Strengthen, Diversify, and Develop Current Degree Programs and Curricula

Revise existing degree programs in order to improve curricular effectiveness, to enhance achievement of curricular goals, to address student needs and the rapidly shifting claims of the world and of the evolving Church, to reflect the increasingly diverse vocational paths students are likely to pursue, to enhance student experience with global opportunities, and to build an increasingly international student body.

Operation Plan:

Review and revise the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree program to make it both more flexible for students who desire a three-year ministerial degree but who do not intend to pursue ordination or church ministry, and, for those who do pursue church ministry, more responsive to the changing skills and experiences required of Church leadership in the 21st century.

Explore the addition of one or more field-based tracks within the current “academic” MA program (two-year).

Re-design the Master of Sacred Theology (STM) with a view toward attracting more international scholars and cultivating a new generation of global leaders;

Strengthen the cohesion of the Ph.D. program, including the incorporation of an international component, with a view toward cultivating scholars equipped to engage in interdisciplinary scholarship and better prepared for employment in an increasingly pluralistic academic environment;

Implement an expanded academic calendar to include educational sessions in the evenings, weekends, and during school breaks, as well as the implementation of a formal summer session;

Continue to develop and embed courses in off-site venues in order to improve course accessibility and enhance contextual learning opportunities. (e.g., courses in prisons, churches, non-profit and community organizations, etc.);

Continue to diversify field education and integrative learning opportunities.

Explore New Degree Programs

Consider, explore, and develop new degree initiatives, such as joint degrees (e.g., Patient Counseling, International Relations, Public Affairs, Business, Law, Fine Arts, Journalism, Ecology); the Doctor of Ministry degree, and/or a new “Professional MA” in one or more specialized ministries.

Operation Plan

Articulate criteria that will guide the selection and design of new degree programs that correspond with Union’s identity, mission, and unique character, and that build on the seminary’s strengths;

Establish new degree priorities and create a timeline for the following: conducting market research and a cost/benefit analysis; developing curricula; obtaining the necessary accreditations (New York State, Association of Theological Schools, Middle States Commission on Higher Education); designing and implementing marketing and recruitment strategies; and assuring qualified and sufficient staffing (faculty and administrative);

Implement new degree programs;

Incorporate into the design of all new degree programs an assessment plan that will enable the seminary to assess student learning and curricular effectiveness and to revise these programs as indicated on a timely and expeditious basis.

2. Pursuing Innovation In Our Approaches to Theological Education

Union is committed to expanding our educational approach and redefining what a seminary education can be in order to create new capacities for spiritual leadership within a shifting world. Union desires to pursue new modes of education both inside its core curriculum and beyond, building on what we have learned from our extensive public and academic programming.

To do this, Union will:

Pursue New Modes of Education

Develop and implement an integrated structure for public programming, which includes continuing education and Union Forum, and that positions Union as a leader in life-long theological education.

Operation plan:

Develop a new senior level position with appropriate infrastructure to initiate, coordinate, and oversee Union's expanding public programs other continuing professional education and lifelong learning opportunities;

Support the enrollment of non-degree students;

Continue to develop innovative public programming on spirituality and contemplative practices, social and ecological justice activism and networking, interreligious engagement, spirituality and the arts, and professional ministerial skill development.

Launch and Support distance and distributive learning courses and co-curricular programming.

Operation Plan:

Develop a comprehensive and strategic distance learning business plan that includes faculty development, technological capacity building, and the hiring of a Digital Learning and Technology Director (or contracted professional) who can provide research, development, and support on an ongoing basis.

3. Recruiting, Retaining, and Supporting Students

Students come to Union because it has an unparalleled commitment to social justice, a world-renowned faculty, a distinctive location in the center of New York City, and a robust network of partner schools. However, the cost of living in New York City along with the price of tuition creates financial stresses that have a significant impact on student retention. Further, the willingness of graduates to pursue innovative and entrepreneurial forms of ministry – that is, their willingness to be the kind of change-agents Union prides itself in producing – is curbed significantly by the ever-increasing burden of debt. Our central strategic task is to remain in the top group of seminaries by attracting and funding competitive students from a wide range of contexts and backgrounds.

To do this, Union will:

Effectively reach and expand Union’s target constituencies; competitively attract and enroll highly qualified and diverse students; and grow strategically the student body to its optimal full-time equivalent size.

Operation Plan:

Develop and execute a strategic admissions plan to assure quality and diversity, and create a world-class, professionalized recruitment and admissions program;

Develop innovative marketing strategies that, along with traditional recruitment, will creatively market Union’s programs through traditional, print, digital, and new media platforms.

Reduce the financial burden of seminary education for enrolled and highly qualified prospective students.

Operation Plan:

Develop and implement a strategy for progressively reducing, and—if possible—eliminating, tuition and housing costs for top students.

Provide students with additional resources for career counseling and placement

Operation Plan:

Develop career counseling and placement support;

Support the development of an alumni/ae mentoring program.

4. Cultivating Intentional Community

The seminary experience is not solely about the formation that takes place in the classroom. Students are decidedly shaped by their encounters with fellow students, faculty, and staff across the campus: in the residence halls, communal spaces, and James Chapel. In a world where self-interest is championed, Union reminds its constituents that our neighbor's well-being is bound up with our own well-being. As a residential campus, Union's capacity for this type of non-classroom development is significant, and the Seminary is intentional about fostering a community that is safe and welcoming to all people. Union is committed to this community formation and sees it as a fundamental part of what the seminary has to offer its constituents.

To do this work, Union will:

Develop and launch innovative residency programming, modeled in part on the successful *Women's Interfaith Residency Program*, that caters to a diversity of student needs;

Make the campus facilities more accessible, redesign campus living and shared spaces to meet the needs of the community, and provide students from all backgrounds comfortable and safe living space;

Operation plan:

Upgrade campus living and shared spaces for students, including installing reliable, cross-campus Wi-Fi and electrical outlets in classrooms;

Make campus facilities more accessible;

Provide intergroup dialogue and conflict resolution training all students, and the broader community;

Affirm the centrality of James Chapel services as an important site for prayer, preaching, and services from many religious perspectives;

Expand partnerships with Community and Public Service Organizations;

Pursue sustainability to improve the integration of our commitment to ecological justice with our community life.

5. Reimagining Faith in the Public Square

Union is a seminary with public influence. Its greatest, most consistent, source of influence has been the work of those affiliated with the institution: students, alumni/ae, board, faculty, and administration. Our public profile has benefited from our growing array of public, on-campus program offerings (e.g., Union Forum, Millennial Leaders Project, Vision Clergy Formation Project, Institute for New Economic Thinking), and our increased involvement with national public policy and denominational initiatives. This position presents a unique opportunity for Union to contribute to an expanded appreciation of the role and significance of faith in the public square by raising our progressive voices clearly and compellingly, particularly on issues of social justice. We see this work as fundamentally linked to our mission as an educational institution called to respond to the claims of the world, not only through our teaching and preparation of religious leaders in our classrooms, but with our public voice and institutional praxis in the arenas of public opinion, politics, and policy.

To do this, Union will:

Strengthen our role as a nationally recognized voice on progressive faith, policy, politics, and culture;

Operation plan:

Reach beyond traditional faith-centered media;

Deepen and expand relationships with decision makers, thought leaders, and media in Washington and New York;

Appoint an Online Media Coordinator and develop a robust, innovative and distinctive online presence;

Develop and implement a comprehensive graphic and architectural redesign of Union's website and social media presence;

Strengthen our role as a local and national convener of thought leaders in religion, media, and democracy;

Operation plan:

Create a Center for Religion and Democracy;

Build bridges between local congregations and advocacy and policy organizations;

Support clergy and lay leaders in direct service and policy advocacy.

6. Assuring Union's Future

For 178 years, Union has trained and commissioned courageous, transformative ministers, educators, and activists. In order to assure the Seminary's future in its current location, Union must address its century-old facilities and the ongoing maintenance costs of its historic campus. It will also need to update its technology to provide cutting-edge opportunities for students, faculty, and staff. Finally, Union must increase its finance and operations capabilities in order to support expanded and innovative programming.

To do this, Union will:

Facilities

Address the restoration and renovation of campus facilities through the Master Plan Committee in order to adequately support the planned growth of the student body and renewed curricular goals.

Technology

Acquire up-to-date technology infrastructure, especially fast and accessible wireless Internet.

Finance and Operations Capabilities

Launch a comprehensive capital campaign to increase the endowment, cover program and operating expenses, and develop a state-of-the-art campus;

Reduce basic administrative and facilities costs, maintaining management best practices and pursuing economies and efficiencies;

Appoint a Director of Development to oversee institutional advancement.

Continuing to Lead

We live in a rapidly changing world, and it has created a culture in which confusion reigns and new possibilities abound. People are hungry to engage in deep conversation and thought about the purpose and meaning of human existence. More than ever, the world needs the resources that Union can provide. This mantle is not new to Union, but the changing landscape of theological education pushes us to consider it with creative vision.

As the Strategic Plan Review Committee worked on this plan, we talked often about the strangeness of being both a community with much to celebrate—growing enrollment, true diversity, an historic legacy and a promising future—and also a community marked by sobering debts: inside our walls and around the world, in our spirits as well as our pocketbooks. The biblical theme of Jubilee captures for us this important tension. In biblical times, the period of Jubilee was marked by the community's celebration of the fruits of its labor as well as a time in which they worked to eliminate the accrued debts that bound them.

Seminaries and schools of theology across the country are asking the same question: what is a sustainable model for graduate theological education, and how do we make our moral and theological resources available to as many people as possible amidst our changing culture? We believe that pursuing the six priorities outlined above will ensure that Union is the institution that it wants to be: an academically serious, educationally and financially innovative seminary that attracts and engages students from a diversity of backgrounds who need our spiritual and intellectual resources more than ever. We will be a seminary that is intentional about its community formation, a seminary that leverages its influence to expand the presence of religion in the public square, and a seminary that tends to its historic facilities to ensure that we can continue our crucial work well into the next century. As we move further into the uncertainty of the 21st century, Union has the legacy, the vision, and the courage to remain a leader in its field.