

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."

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

We present this new 2014 Strategic Plan, giving it a new six-year scope that extends it into the next decade. By implementing this 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

There is a strangeness in 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? 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.