



**Meadville Lombard**  
Theological School

**For Immediate Release**

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*Theological education for a new century*

## **Meadville Lombard adopts new educational model**

Theological education became defined for the 21st century with the action of the Board of Trustees of Meadville Lombard Theological School on November 14 and 15, 2008. The Board of Trustees has approved the administration's recommendation to adopt a new educational design, one that yokes practice with theory throughout a student's tenure in the school and provides the possibility of completing the Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree program in three years and earning a dual MDiv/Master of Arts degree in four years.

Lawrence Ladd, Chair of the Board of Trustees, in a letter to the Meadville Lombard community, noted that "the discussion preceding this vote was intense and serious, taking into account the views of everyone who cares about the school's traditions and future." He concluded his letter saying "we (the Board) know the Meadville Lombard Educational Model is groundbreaking for all of theological education. We are especially proud that Meadville Lombard is a leader in this effort." In fact, Board members were so enthusiastic about the direction of the school, that many of them increased previous pledges to the school's annual fund, bringing the combined Trustees pledging to \$75,000, nearly 10 percent of the total fundraising goal for the year.

This model was developed by the faculty and administration to provide an arc of formation for ministerial excellence that builds on the school's reputation of academic excellence by adding requirements for ministerial practice from the student's first weeks in seminary. Dr. Michael Hogue, Assistant Professor of Theology and recent recipient of the Templeton Prize for Theological Promise, says the Meadville Lombard Educational Model is both new and ancient--putting into practice the emergent thought of today's preeminent theologians as well as the ancient practice of discipleship in community. "The Meadville Model reflects a recovery of theology as a way of life from the longstanding treatment of theology as a science," Hogue wrote in a paper he submitted to the Board that looks at several of the critical theological shifts shaping the new educational model.

Dr. Sharon Welch, Provost, says the Meadville Lombard Educational Model will, as referenced by Hogue, bring students into living theology, rather than studying it. "The re-integration of practice into the early

stages of seminary stems from the understanding of human learning that we do not think ourselves into new ways of acting--we act ourselves into new ways of thinking, being, and seeing."

One of the aspects of the model that particularly excites Welch as a Unitarian Universalist, is that the model encourages students to "cross boundaries--boundaries of culture, of religion, even of worship styles," says Welch. "The teaching behind the model responds to a hunger for a new way of being religious in the 21st century--a way that is alive and full of an energy; a way that makes sense to our children, youth and young adults as it remains relevant and intellectually challenging for all of us. I see it," says Welch, "as a mechanism for learning and for teaching so that when our students graduate they will have the tools to go out and create worship experiences and forms of congregational advocacy that are as aesthetically rich as they are intellectually compelling."

At the Board of Trustees meeting, Dr. Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University and chair of the Education Team for the Board of Trustees, said his excitement for the new model hinges on the possibilities of providing an arc of formation that can be tailored to the strengths, weaknesses, and life and professional experiences of each individual student. "The model allows the school to meet students where they are while preparing them for the life- and world-changing ministries they envision for themselves."

While the new model requires a great shift in how theological education is delivered, says Pinn, it also reflects the new research in how students best learn. "If not for the quality of the leadership of this administration and the creativity of this faculty, I might be worried about how such a change could be managed," said Pinn. "But having been a student and colleague of Sharon (Welch), and having worked with this faculty around curriculum and concerns about implementation, I feel that this is the place where this model can best come to life."

In his letter, Ladd noted "the Board is pleased with the thoughtful work the school's faculty and administration have done" in fleshing out the model since questions about the original model were raised at the June meeting of the Board. Those concerns came from some students and alumni/ae who observed that model eliminated the full-time, nine-month congregational internship--a key element in their particular formation experience--in favor of an internship integrated throughout the formation program. Under the plan outlined in June, students could receive their Master of Divinity in three years of academic work paired with real-life experience in community and congregational settings.

Responding to this concern, the model as adopted by the Board of Trustees in November includes an opportunity for students to complete a dual degree--the Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Ministerial Leadership--during a fourth year. In this dual degree program, students complete a full-year internship in the fourth year, providing an opportunity for this experience that has been so rich for our past graduates. Unitarian Universalist ministerial candidates will be eligible to meet with the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee in the beginning of their third year.

Rev. Dr. Lee Barker, DMin '78 DD '01, President and Professor of Ministry, sees the additional degree as adding a dimension of value that many students may wish to attain. "As a student at this school," says Barker, "there is no doubt that the full-year internship was the pivotal experience in my formation. But,"

he adds, "I didn't receive any practical experiences of congregational ministry before I went on my internship. This model provides a new arc of formation," says Barker. "While the three-year program will prepare our students for ministries of excellence wherever they choose to serve, the dual degree program is a way to provide even greater distinction in ministerial preparation."

The Meadville Lombard Educational Model is built upon the foundation of practice paired with theory and mentorship. Three signature courses are offered--one each year of the academic program. These courses require practical experience in community and congregational settings as well as classroom meetings where students discuss readings relevant to the work of the course and their experiences in their work sites. Other required elements include traditional academic courses and a three-year mentoring relationship with a minister and congregation.

Another element of the MLEM is the opportunity for students to do "rotations." These would be specific site assignments that are paired with an academic course. For example, a student might take a course in Religious Education and, at the same time, work either developing curriculum or leading lifespan development courses. Rotations are designed by the student with assistance from faculty to address either specific interests or to bolster areas where the student may feel they need additional focus.

Further, the model is perfect for adaptation for students who do not live local to the Chicago seminary. Students who live at a distance can enroll in the "TouchPoint" program and avail themselves of the same academic opportunities the school offers in the intensive class format, while addressing the practical elements in locations near their homes. The TouchPoint format continues to provide the accessibility students have had through our Modified Residency Program. In fact, much of the Meadville Lombard Education Model is based on the many successful elements of the Modified Residency Program--a program that allowed students to complete the degree with minimal residency requirements.

With the Board's action, the school will begin implementation of the model beginning with the class matriculating in the Fall of 2009.

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