

# Embracing Diversity, Facing Division: The Bridge-Building Project of Bethany Theological Seminary, A Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow Grant Update

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Since receiving a Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow grant last year, Bethany Theological Seminary has been hard at work developing new programming and implementing strategies and practices to carry out the work inspired by the funding. We have launched a new co-curricular program for residential students, held three faculty colloquy conversations, and hired a coordinator of community engagement to serve as liaison between students and local nonprofit agencies in the Richmond, Indiana, area.

The new co-curricular program began when the team assembled to create it started to imagine a student-centered program of leadership development that focused intensely on issues of race and class. To that end, we created a new experiential initiative for residential students who want a transformational education to put their faith in action to serve and change the world, which we named Bethany BOLD. The program is open to students who are seeking an MDiv degree, an MA degree, or any of the full range of certificates that Bethany Theological Seminary offers. From a previous Lilly grant, the success of which laid the foundation for BOLD, we committed to a promise of no new debt for our students, so students in BOLD receive full-tuition scholarships, free housing, and a living stipend, undergirded by the values of simple living and conscious consumption, while they engage in community service through volunteering. The acronym BOLD means Build, Organize, Love, Dare.

**BUILD:** to do the personal work needed to grow in capacity as a leader who is a capable adult, taking responsibility for our actions and cultivating self-respect.

**ORGANIZE:** to make sense of the communities we strive to lead by learning how structures and organizations work, developing a nuanced understanding of race and class.

**LOVE:** to fully engage in serving as we live out our faith, joyfully offering our hearts and whole selves in the hope of bettering the lives of others.

**DARE:** to push and question, seeking the courage and grit to see this challenging project through, living into the uncertainty and ambiguity that accompanies difficult tasks, developing the deep resiliency that leaders rely on.

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For four to six hours per week during the academic semester, students in BOLD work with underserved and at-risk populations through nonprofit organizations and learn how issues of class and race function within our small Midwestern town. An essential piece of the BOLD program is reflecting on these experiences. Students meet on Mondays for an hour to discuss their volunteering and event attendance, and they journal daily in response to a rotating set of prompts that provide opportunities to make connections between their experiential and classroom learning, notice their responses to challenges, and, hopefully, narrate their growth in resilience and understanding across differences. We rely heavily on experiences that stretch our students and expose them to settings and contextual realities that are different from the ones in which they have been shaped and formed. This work requires an intentional process that includes considerable engagement with the action-reflection learning model and frequent debriefing and reflection exercises with the leaders in the program. This approach to teaching our students through engagement with real-world situations and issues hinges on the belief that contextual awareness matters. In order to be effective and faithful ministerial leaders, we expect our students to be able to learn how to read what is happening in their community to become as contextually aware as possible.

Secondly, to support the director of the BOLD program, Dr. Margaret Elwell, assistant professor of peace studies, the seminary hired Derek Parker, a local Quaker recorded minister. Derek also has extensive experience in collaborating with local nonprofit leaders and their agencies from his years of local ministry. Derek has been an excellent addition to the seminary staff and is living intentionally into this new role for this new program. We are excited to have Derek on board and bringing his many gifts and graces to this position.

Finally, as mentioned above, the faculty have met three times over the course of the past fifteen months to discuss what it means to embrace diversity and face division. We have approached this academically, seeking deeper understanding for curricular implications of how the bridge-building exercises we are inviting our students to participate in can be undergirded through what we are teaching in the classroom. We have also approached these conversations with a sense of connecting the academic to the practical. This has involved bringing in local practitioners of ministry, pastors and other spiritual leaders, to discuss issues of race and class and how they address these matters in their own contexts. This continues to be a fruitful process for the faculty. We are excited to have the funding from Lilly, which has enabled these multiple streams that are informing our work. We are also excited about the ways this work is stretching us and inviting us to lean into addressing the changing realities of what ministerial leadership looks like in this ever-changing cultural and ecclesial landscape. We are pleased to share these updates with our friends and colleagues in the world of theological field education.