

Lutherans merge seminary, university on West Coast

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

Though the two campuses are 400 miles apart, California Lutheran University in Southern California will merge with the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley.

The Church Council, or board, of the Chicago-based Evangelical Lutheran Church in America approved the merger July 11 in what was described by a news release as “a move toward advancing sustainable theological education.”

The Berkeley seminary was a founding member in 1952 of the Graduate Theological Union, an ecumenical and interfaith consortium with a campus overlooking San Francisco Bay. PLTS was located in previous decades in Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington.

The merger is the second one between an ELCA seminary and university. In 2011, Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina, merged with Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary.

The ELCA has eight seminaries and 26 colleges and universities, and church leaders have looked at possible mergers to bolster the strength of its theological schools.

“There is general agreement that seminaries of ELCA and other mainline denominations are having a rougher go of it now than they did during the previous decade,” said Chris Kimball, president of Cal Lutheran, in an interview. Studies have shown downturns in seminary enrollments and budgets even as graduates find few pulpit openings to help pay off their student loans.

“Within the ELCA, people saw they needed to do some rigorous thinking,” said Kimball, “and recognize that a university could provide not just financial efficiency but also an opportunity to widen the curriculum.” Seminarians and pastors, for example, “could have access to graduate education in psychology, management or countless other things that pastors find when they get into a congregation,” he said.

Pacific Lutheran, which has about 80 degree students, will keep its name and the Berkeley campus, but it will become part of California Lutheran University. PLTS president Phyllis B. Anderson is retiring by the end of the year and her replacement on January 1 will hold the combined post of dean and chief administrative officer of the seminary.

Her successor will be one of five deans who report to the provost and president of Cal Lutheran.

Located in Thousand Oaks, Cal Lutheran is halfway between downtown Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. Despite the recession of recent years, Kimball said, it has had “record enrollments across the board and our financial position, I think, has never been stronger.”

The school is relatively young, 50 years, and it is “very much into the building mode,” he said. “We are doing this merger from a position of strength and confidence, not weakness and fear.”