

Surprise gift largest ever for Pittsburgh seminary

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Pittsburgh Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received a surprise gift of \$20.25 million.

Robert Thomson, an insurance company owner who died in September at age 94, did not tell the school about his estate plans, nor did he place restrictions on the gift, said William Carl, seminary president.

“These are wonderful surprises,” Carl told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “This is the biggest gift that has ever come from anyone, living or deceased, in the over-220-year history of the school.”

Carl also told the *Post-Gazette* that Thomson would meet with students at scholarship dinners and make comments such as, “I’m so impressed with your students, impressed with where they’re going to serve in churches and mission fields around the country and the world.”

The gift allows the seminary to reach its goal early in a \$26 million capital campaign that began in 2010, although the school’s board of directors has yet to determine where to allocate the funds, said Melissa Logan, seminary director of communications.

“A gift like this really allows an institution to think about the future and how to serve the church,” Logan said.

The largest private gifts in 2013–2014 to institutions of higher education exceeded \$50 million, and none were to theological schools, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* website. In a list of gifts of that size in recent decades, only three went to theological schools, with the largest being a 1999 donation of \$83.3 million to Emory University’s School of Theology. (Some donations to universities with divinity schools do not specify the nature of the gift.)

Thomson grew up at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, also in Pittsburgh, and was a member there until his death, serving as treasurer and in other roles.

Jackie Spycher, a former youth director at Shadyside who studied at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, remembers Thomson as being “very active and very present, but in a quiet way. This public acclaim is not something he would have sought out.”