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Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry Prepares for Closure

Zhangir Kalmykov , Volunteer Reporter

The end of a program or school is never an instantaneous event but rather a gradual process that leaves many students conflicted but hopeful for solutions.

Students and faculty of the School of Theology and Ministry (STM) were notified on June 30, 2020 that their school will be closing, after the school operated at significant losses for three consecutive years. On that day, students, staff and alumni were surprised by the decision from the Board of the Trustees.

The massive shift caused some students to rethink their academic and career plans. It was a uniquely consequential email for learners and educators affiliated with the school.

Jin Lee, a student receiving his Masters in divinity at STM and a member of the "Speak out for STM" student group (SOFSTM) shared how he was struck with the news of STM closing.

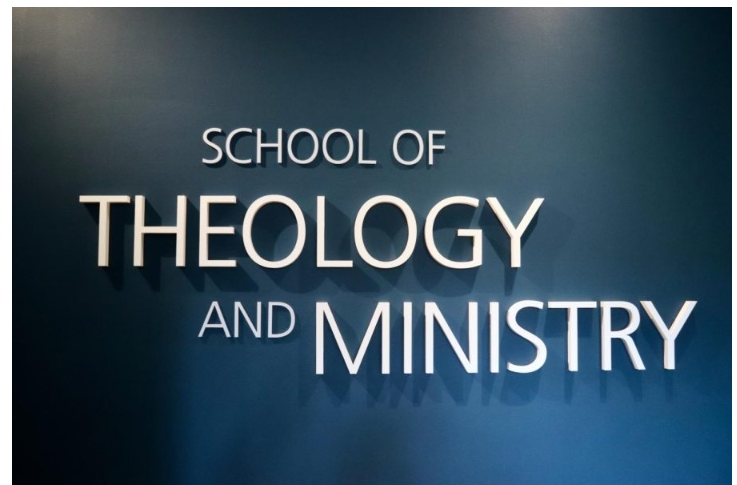
"Last year during the pandemic, I was already in a very vulnerable state and I was thinking of possibly taking a break or putting a pause on school. But I got an email out of the blue from the former Dean saying that 'Oh by the way STM is sunseting and if you need help with transferring you have about one or two years' ... That was how I learned of the STM closing, it totally came out of the blue," Lee said.

Lee argues that there was a lack of transparency displayed by the university in the closing of STM.

"I came in 2016 and I was never told about STM sunseting until I got an email last year saying 'Deal with it.' It was not transparent at all. This caused a lot of students to be upset," Lee said.

The decision to close STM was not made until Apr. 30 of last year. As a result, students who were already enrolled, including Lee, experienced a change in academic plans.

Jessica Zimmerle, a graduate student pursuing a Masters of Arts in ecotheology at STM and a member of the SOFSTM described the strengths of STM.



Andrew Mori

School of Theology and Ministry (STM) signage in the lobby of Hunthausen Hall.

"I'm Lutheran and I intentionally chose to go to SU instead of a Lutheran seminary because I wanted to be immersed in cross-cultural experiences with folks from all different traditions. That was really at the core of STM and what it did really well in terms of bringing diverse voices as students and also as faculty," Zimmerle said.

Zimmerle explained her appreciation for the school's diversity and uniqueness as a graduate-level school of theology with a focus on social justice.

"Our active Dean right now is a woman who is Jewish and queer and an amazing Hebrew Bible scholar. I learned my New Testament studies from a professor who is Latina and from the borderlands and our intercultural studies were with a Korean-American professor who really focused on ministerial leadership," Zimmerle said. "That was such a unique experience in comparison to other opportunities out there for higher education. That's what I think will be a huge loss."

SOFSTM was formed in response to student and alumni uncertainty around the closure of the school.

Lorenzo McDuffie, a doctor of ministry candidate at STM and a member of SOFSTM, spoke about their group's primary goals.

"Through this whole 16 month ordeal collectively, I believe our mission is to really advocate for the STM community, the students and the alumni with transparency and compassion. Because the university leadership gave us this in a way that was dishonest and not transparent," McDuffie said.

McDuffie additionally shared his thoughts on whether Seattle U will be able to maintain its Catholic character.

"I always have hope. Even when it's messy, I always see some glimmer of light in the darkness, so I hope that Seattle U will be what it says it will be in its mission and its vision," McDuffie said. "In the moment, it has hit a very bumpy road with the STM community. It's gonna take some time to heal from this and I believe we have done our due diligence in working with the administration."

Catherine Ruha, an STM graduate with a Masters in pastoral studies and a member of SOFSTM, spoke about finishing her degree in 2020.

"The people who are taking care of students and making sure they get their degrees—they're doing a great job. I remember I had just graduated and then the announcement came two weeks later. So, everyone was like 'Well, you were really lucky!' but I'm like 'Yeah but everyone else isn't really lucky, right?' The closing impacts me because it impacts so many of my colleagues horribly and also because it's like this whole vision and aspiration of what the world can be about—that's closing," Ruha said.

Erica Martin, executive director of STM and assistant dean of academic affairs, shared the details of the process of closing of STM and its future.

"A school doesn't just turn off like a tap, it keeps running, and we have a three-year gap," Martin said. "That's something that our students successfully argued for. So, instead of the two years that was initially proposed, they got three years until the actual closure."

Martin addressed SOFSTM's concerns about the loss of progressive ministerial education in the future.

"I have a personal stake in it to be very honest. I'm a Jewish, lesbian woman who gets to teach at a school forming ministerial leaders. It's a dream location. It is just a nexus of everything my heart is behind for theological education. I'm heartbroken for that opportunity for all sorts of progressive Christian and interfaith ministers is going to be gone," Martin said.

Martin has hope that Seattle U will continue its commitment to graduate-level theological education when the university is in a better financial situation.

"There is a desire to come up with an idea that would make this some sort of theological education or formation viable. The right idea just hasn't manifested that's going to work for everyone, and that could take a couple years," Martin said.

After the announcement of the school's closure, the common question emerged of whether Seattle U will still offer any sort of graduate-level theology education if the ministerial programs are closing down.

Provost Shane Martin shared Seattle U's vision of the future for potential graduate-level theology work and the reasoning for the closure of STM.

"We have a graduate program that was in the STM in couples counseling that has a pastoral foundation, and that program is going to the College of Arts and Sciences," Martin said. "We're in the process of reaching out and closing other programs, so we're not in the process of starting new programs. However, we are engaged in a process where we are going to look at other possibilities to put work in this area."

Despite the pain that comes with the closing of STM, the low enrollment and financial issues faced by the school are undeniable. The school operated at margin losses for three years in a row, causing the university to accrue a million dollar margin loss in fall quarter 2019.

This reality confronted by Seattle U's administration and Board of Trustees was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused additional financial hardship for the university.

"There's a range of degree programs that are foundational programs for work in areas of mission and ministry. Certainly, the masters of divinity and doctorate of ministry would be two programs that were not really utilized. We had very low enrollment in those programs," Martin said.

The provost also addressed the future of Seattle U's Catholic identity.

"One of the things that President Peñalver has made clear is that the school's mission and identity comes as a foundational goal for him as president," Martin said.

In addition, Martin acknowledged the difficulty of the school's decision and its impact upon students.

"Closing a school that has such a storied history as the School of Theology is an incredibly difficult decision and it comes with pain and it comes with a challenge," Martin said. "This decision was not made lightly by our board and I think we all have to recognize that the School of Theology and Ministry has made an incredible contribution to graduates and leaders in our region."

The pain brought on by this great loss to Seattle U may be long lasting in its impact. However, the actions of SOFSTM illustrate the strong collective action skills of STM students and alumni, suggesting the continued impact of the school upon the northwest.