

Beloved,

We are certainly living in unprecedented times. When I took office as NYTS's twelfth and first female President, I had no idea that COVID-19 was around the corner. I'm sure as many of you entered this New Year and new decade with hope and anticipation, you were also blindsided by this pandemic. What a way to start a new decade. And yet - I can still hear the words of my great-grandmother as she sang this old spiritual;

*Take courage my soul, and let us journey on.*

*For the night is dark and I am far from home.*

*Thanks be to God, the morning light appears.*

*The storm is passing over, the storm is passing over.*

*The storm is passing over Hallelujah.*

*Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.*

I hope these words bring you comfort as they do me. The storm did not come to stay. It came to pass. Therefore our souls will take courage. In taking courage, we do not have to pretend that things are the same. I must admit; things are not the same at NYTS. We realize that we are just brick and mortar without our students, our faculty, our staff, our alumni and our community. We miss you!

As we live in the days of social distancing, a global health crisis, unprecedented lay-offs and terminations, and family and friends suffering from sickness and death; we recognize that the sustenance and maturation of our faith is even more crucial. I was just listening to Governor Cuomo's most recent press conference and was both saddened and encouraged within minutes. Saddened to hear that we have over 20,000 cases of COVID-19 in New York State - and encouraged that most people are recovering with no long term side effects. And yet - our fight continues.

In response to the Governor's 'stay home' mandate, **NYTS will continue to move forward remotely, but our physical offices are closed until further notice.** While public gatherings are prohibited, and while we must maintain appropriate physical distance; displacement, disruption and division will not stop the grace and growth of God's family. I am grateful that we have a faculty and staff that are dedicated to the continued education and support of our students and I am grateful for our students, who are committed to finishing what they have started.

### **Students**

Unlike many residential sister schools who are sending students home for the semester, you all have not had to deal with displacement. Yet, you have done what many of our schools are still struggling to do - move to an online class platform. On Friday, we finished our first week of online classes and we could not have done it without your support, understanding and commitment.

Unlike other schools whose students had already been using an online platform, we transitioned from a fully residential program to a fully online program. And you did it with less than a week's notice. Thank you for how you have responded and not missed a beat as we were forced to make a quick, hard transition with little preparation. I am so proud of you all! We will monitor our progress for the remainder of the semester and encourage you to call or

email the help desk if you experience any challenges. We remain committed to our mission and mandate to “prepare faith and thought leaders to engage relevant, restorative and revolutionary ministry” now more than ever. Thank you for helping this mission come to life!

### **Staff**

Our administrative staff have done an outstanding job of working from home offices. Beginning last Tuesday, most of our staff began working from home and continued to provide seamless services to the NYTS community. This week, everyone is working from home as we continue to rise to the challenge. We are grateful for the technology that keeps us connected. Our dynamic staff have been responsive to students through phone conversations and emails.

Our admissions team is still at work and we just welcomed a new Korean speaking Doctor of Ministry cohort to the NYTS family this past week. If you know of anyone who is interested in pursuing theological education, let them know that there is no better place than NYTS and there is no better time than now! Please continue to reach out to our faithful staff with any questions, thoughts, or concerns you may have. We are happy to respond to you as quickly as we can. This team has been such a blessing. Thank you for your faithfulness.

### **Faculty**

We have an amazing faculty! This dynamic group of scholars transitioned to online teaching in less than one week - with no interruption. Special thanks to our online team led by Dr. Han for training our faculty and preparing a slideshow to support our students in their transition. To move from a completely residential program to a completely online teaching model is challenging, but to have done it in less than a week is extraordinary. They continue to provide the high quality theological education that our NYTS students deserve and we are grateful for their presence. Thank you for your faithfulness in such challenging times!

### **Alumni**

We have over four thousand alumni across the world. Our alumni are the tentacles of NYTS that continue to inform the world of the unique work that happens at our thriving institution. Your continued love and support helps us sustain our reputation and impact around the globe. Thank you for your continued prayers and support during this crisis. I continue to be impressed by the impact you are making in your communities, in our houses of worship, in your workplaces and in your families. A recent email from one of our alums stated that he was “encouraged by the new life that has been infused in this institution that I am so proud to be a part of...” I agree - I am so proud to be a part of this great institution and I know that the best is yet to come. I pray you will continue to pray for us and to send your financial contributions that are needed now more than ever before. Thank you for your commitment to NYTS’s future.

### **The Board of Trustees**

NYTS is blessed to have a Board of Trustees that is heavily invested in the life and work of our community. At our executive meeting last Thursday, the leadership teams of the board recognized the excellence of the work that has gone forward. They are proud to serve the community that serves itself and others so well. As servant leaders, they remain committed to governance, faith raising and fundraising and ensuring the health of our great institution. While we have had to cancel two of our upcoming fundraisers, we recognize that the work must still be funded in order for the mission to continue to live. We appreciate your continued

faithfulness to our mission and vision. Thank you for your commitment to govern in a time of crisis!

### **Graduation**

I am so proud of our graduating seniors who continue to press toward the mark of the high calling in Jesus Christ by being strong finishers! They are not allowing this pandemic to stop them from achieving the completion of their degrees. I am especially grateful to all of our Doctor of Ministry students who continue to complete and defend their dissertations - some online and others over a conference call. You all rock!

I know that many of you are anxious about graduation. While we have not made any definitive plans for graduation at this time, we recognize the importance of our students, their families, friends and the NYTS family taking time to recognize and celebrate this huge accomplishment. We know the hard work and sacrifice that leads to graduation and we are committed to honoring your achievement.

Due to our statewide mandate, unfortunately, we are forced to postpone our graduation. The challenge is determining the best date to reschedule with the current uncertainty of COVID -19. Once a decision is made, we will be sending a separate email to inform you of how we plan to move forward. Please be patient with us as we determine the best way to confer degrees, provide diplomas, and determine the date of our commencement exercise. Remember, those who complete all requirements and are eligible will still be able to declare to the nations that you are an official graduate of New York Theological Seminary as of May 16, 2020. Unfortunately, we do not have any additional information or answers to your questions right now but, logistics will be coming within the next two weeks. Thank you for your patience.

### **Prayer**

We are grateful that NYTS has been participating in our “40 Days of Prayer and Fasting” during the Lenten season. Prayer is a central part of living a disciplined God centered life and NYTS is not only praying individually and collectively within our faith communities, but also collectively within our theological community. I am so grateful that we answered the call to pray and fast prior to the development of this pandemic. Thank you to those of you who have been participating so far in our noon day prayer call. For those who have not, it is not too late. You can [sign up here](#). I look forward to praying with you daily, Monday through Friday through April 11, 2020.

### **Closing**

Did I say how proud I am to be a part of such a dynamic institution? I am! I never knew how amazingly wonderful, complicated and challenging life could be and I am so grateful to be learning it with such an amazing theological family. Thank you NYTS for being the best of the best. While this is a frightening time for so many, it is our faith and not our fear that will help us overcome our worst fears and emerge wiser, stronger and better than before. I believe that the “God Factor” is still at work and the best is yet to come.

One of my mentors, Rev. Dr. Cecelia Williams Bryant reminded me not long ago that we have the victory. God has already given us the victory. So, since the enemy can't have our victory -

he will settle for our joy. Let's be encouraged to not allow these circumstances to diminish our light or our joy! Encourage your soul and journey on... [The Storm Is Passing Over](#).

We will continue to keep you informed as our world continues to evolve. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. I love hearing from you - especially in times like these. I love you with the love of the Lord.

Blessings,  
Your President,

Reverend Dr. LaKeesha Walrond