

October 2023

Hello prospective CMHC faculty applicant -

We are delighted that you are interested in learning more about the open faculty position in the MA in Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at Western Theological Seminary (WTS). Since potential applicants may not have prior knowledge of WTS, we wanted to write this letter to share the vision and values that have guided the development of this degree program. We hope that you will explore the [WTS website](#) to learn about the history, mission, and community life of our seminary, including our [Statement of Theological Identity](#), our commitment to [supporting women](#) in their formation for ministry and leadership, and our commitment to [racial and ethnic diversity and justice](#).

In this letter we want to give you the opportunity to hear the imagination and heart behind the MA in CMHC program at Western. While this is a new degree program at WTS (with the first cohort of students starting in Fall 2024), its launch is the result of an extensive and intentional planning process by the WTS Administration, Board of Trustees, faculty, and staff over the past several years. The CMHC degree program is designed to be fully aligned with CACREP standards and we plan to pursue CACREP accreditation once we are eligible. WTS is committed to designing and supporting a counselor education program that is characterized by academic, professional, and clinical excellence and committed to the whole-person formation of future counselors.

The design of the MA in CMHC at WTS is rooted in the foundational reality that we are created in-and-for relationship, image-bearers of a Trinitarian God and ambassadors of God's shalom in a broken world. The MA in CMHC will equip women and men to be wise, competent, humble and hopeful practitioners, who are attuned to their own selves and stories while remaining anchored in God's Story of redemption and restoration. Our relationally-oriented and trauma-informed program will offer the most contemporary, research-based training while, at the same time, remaining deeply rooted in a Christian soul care tradition which has informed compassionate care for centuries. Let's explore a few of these distinctives more carefully.

Relationally-Oriented

At its core, the work of counseling is about relationships. The counselor does not primarily offer advice or solutions to those who are struggling, instead they offer a unique and safe relational context in which transformation can occur. In light of this, the MA in CMHC program has been designed in a way that prioritizes relational formation over mere information-delivery; in other words, the deep *formation* of the person of the counselor. This means that students are provided not merely with knowledge and skills but with relational experiences that deepen their capacity for offering genuine and effective care.

By offering an in-person, cohort-based program, students have the opportunity for meaningful connection with other students, staff, and faculty within the broader WTS learning community. This experience of knowing and being known is core to the emotional and spiritual health of the future

counselor. Investing the time and energy to complete a MA program that is characterized by this relationally-oriented approach to counselor preparation may not be the quickest way to get a degree, but we believe it has long-term value to prepare students exceptionally for the work of caring for those who are suffering. Thus, the MA in CMHC at Western has been designed as an in-person, cohort-based program to be completed by students over three years. We believe that this kind of emotional, spiritual, relational, and professional formation is worth the investment of time.

Trauma-Informed

The CMHC program is also trauma-informed, which is to say that we draw from the latest research-based insights into deep healing, health and wholeness. Trauma is simply the Greek word for *wound*, and trauma-informed care addresses not merely what happened to us to cause pain throughout our lives but *what happens within us* when stresses and struggles tax our bodies and weary our hearts, wounding us to the core.

We believe that the deepest imprint within is the image of God - that we are designed for dignity, created for relationship, formed for purposeful ambassadorship as God's beloved in the world. But we understand today that the imprint of trauma often feels like it runs deeper still for some, robbing them of a sense of joy, worth, belonging, purpose, and more. Trauma-informed care, in its many variations today, seeks to tend to the whole person, to the psychic and somatic wounds that overwhelm, restoring us to wholeness and resilience.

Christian Soul Care Tradition

Deep soul care did not originate with the advent of psychology in the 19th century, but has been a deep and rich part of the Christian tradition from the first centuries of the church. At WTS, we lean into a larger imagination for compassionate care by wedding ancient wisdom with contemporary theories of counseling and psychology.

When we use the language of "soul care," we are referring to a Christian tradition of deep and thoughtful engagement with issues of the human heart and its motives, with sin and suffering, with pathology and personality, and with what the classic Christian tradition called "disorder," anticipating the language psychologists and counselors use today. We believe it is important for today's Christian therapists to understand how their work is embedded in a long tradition of care, and to see their work as a contemporary continuation of the soul work many have been doing for centuries.

Humble and Hopeful

Finally, in a time when the church and clergy are facing a crisis of trust, and when counselors are often privy to the painful stories people tell, we want to equip future counselors to both hold these stories of pain and offer hope that a better story might be written. In a cultural moment dominated by cynicism and suspicion, our desire is to form hopeful and humble counselors. We want to invite future colleagues to join us in a program that doesn't minimize the painful realities we're facing both individually and collectively, but which offers a way forward through the morass. We want our



faculty and students to be able to partner with churches and clergy to form cultures of shalom, of wholeness, where God's peace reigns.

Join Us!

The community at Western is filled with women and men pursuing a variety of Masters-level degrees, graduate certificates, Doctor of Ministry degrees, and more. Together, we enjoy a rich in-residence life together, praying and worshipping together in chapel four times a week, culminating in communion on Fridays. Western is located in Holland, Michigan - a beautiful town on the shores of Lake Michigan. We invite you to join us within a community where you'll find hope, belonging, honesty, compassion, and so much more.

If you have further questions, please reach out via email to either Dr. Elizabeth Pennock or Dr. Chuck DeGroat. In the meantime, we're praying for your important discernment process.

Kindly,

Elizabeth Pennock, PhD, LPC
Director of the CMHC Program
Associate Professor of Counseling
elizabeth.pennock@westernsem.edu

Chuck DeGroat, PhD, LPC
Executive Director of the CMHC Program
Professor of Pastoral Care and Christian Spirituality
chuck.degroat@westernsem.edu