

Plans for interfaith seminary shelved

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

April 28, 2011

(RNS) When leaders of the nation's oldest seminary and a Unitarian Universalist theological school began to dream of building a new partnership, they planned to create a futuristic model of religious higher education.

But after more than a year of discussions, Andover Newton Theological School outside Boston and Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago have canceled plans to jointly create a multifaith institution.

Although the schools' different religious identities were a key aspect of the negotiations, presidents of both schools said other matters -- from finances to accreditation issues -- prompted a halt to their talks.

"We found ourselves in a stronger financial position in a stand-alone model than we would have been in the cooperative venture, and that meant that we had to look really hard at our own fiduciary responsibility to our own seminary," said the Rev. Lee Barker, president of the Chicago school.

The Unitarian Universalist seminary, which is transitioning to a nonresidential school, has about 130 students, most of whom only visit Chicago for occasional intensive classes.

Andover Newton, which is based in Newton Centre, Mass., has about 300 students and is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA and the United Church of Christ.

Interfaith relations are "not impossible to create," Barker said, but with congregations tending to give less financial support to seminaries, it wasn't the right time for such a partnership.

"There was a great deal of enthusiasm" about the academic aspects of the proposal, said the Rev. Nick Carter, president of Andover Newton. "It was the governance and the consequences of the governance on things like finances ... that really started to take it apart."

As of 2012, the nearby Hebrew College will be housed on Andover Newton's campus. The two Massachusetts schools have been collaborating for a decade and had "more lead time" for a closer affiliation, Carter said.

Barker and Carter hope the multifaith model they envisioned may still take root someday, even if it is not created by their two schools. Other schools expressed interest in the proposed "theological university" but did not enter formal discussions.

"We're tied to the real world of institutions and constituencies and fiduciary responsibility," Barker said, "but in no way in my mind does that undermine the vision of what we were trying to do."

The two schools still plan to offer joint programs for their doctorate of ministry students, including a preaching class in June at Andover Newton.