

Seminary faculty, dean at impasse

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General Theological Seminary, located in Manhattan, has been the site of recent faculty-administration conflict. [Some rights reserved](#) by [edenpictures](#)

Nearly the entire full-time faculty at the Episcopal Church's oldest seminary is battling with the school's leadership, although the sides do not agree on whether the professors quit, were fired, or staged a walkout.

Either way, the dispute revives a long-standing debate about the future of General Theological Seminary in New York City, which has produced generations of bishops and noted theologians and is the only Episcopal seminary overseen by the national church.

Eight professors—Joshua Davis, Mitties DeChamplain, Deirdre Good, David Hurd, Andrew Irving, Andrew Kadel, Amy Lamborn, and Patrick Malloy—announced in late September that they would stop teaching classes, attending official seminary meetings, or attending chapel services until they could sit down with the board of trustees. The school reported ten full-time faculty in its 2013–2014 annual report to the Association of Theological Schools.

On September 30, the board of trustees wrote that it had accepted the resignations of the eight faculty members.

“The Board came to this decision with heavy hearts, but following months of internal divisions around the future direction of General Seminary,” the statement said, “it has become clear that this is the best path forward in educating our students and shaping them into leaders of the church.”

After the conflict became public, the faculty members launched a website, safeseminary.org, where they stated that they did not resign, but rather “undertook a legal work stoppage” after months of raising concerns such as charges that the seminary dean and president, Kurt Dunkle, had made racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks.

“We were invoking a common labor practice at the advice of our attorney stating that we could not work under these conditions,” the faculty members wrote. “It is impossible to teach Christian theology and serve the formation of priests and lay leaders in a workplace environment that is retaliatory and hostile, where we and our students are suffering intimidation.”

Mark Sisk, chair of the board of trustees, offered in an October 1 letter to hold a meeting of the board’s executive committee—and potentially other board members suggested by the faculty—with the eight professors.

“I anticipate the attorney investigating the accusations pertaining to President and Dean Dunkle will have completed his investigation [by the date of the meeting] with your full cooperation,” he wrote.

In an earlier letter, the eight faculty laid out concerns with the school’s leader: “Specifically, his references to women, non-white cultures, and the LGBT community are absolutely inimical to the commitments of our church,” the professors wrote.

Dunkle responded in an October 3 statement: “Since I have arrived at General I have been very clear in frequent public and private gatherings that my number one goal is to make sure meaning attaches to the word ‘general’ in our title . . . When people allege that I said I don’t want General to be the ‘gay seminary,’ I have said that. But it is only said in the context of just the gay seminary. . . . That “just” connotation is an essential part of the entire message. . . . All of God’s children, whether you are LGBT or not, are part of general.”

The statement continued: “I welcome the on-going investigation and to comment specifically here (other than the very important correction about LGBT issues,

above) would be contrary to the Board's request of my silence pending conclusion of their investigation . . . That said, I'm also sure something or somethings will emerge which I would like to put differently next time. Why? Because I'm human. But none of those wanted do-overs involve the egregious allegations."

Finally, Dunkle noted that when he arrived, the seminary was emerging from "a \$42 million unfunded debt crisis."

GTS was attempting to pay its debt down through property sales and redevelopment. GTS redesigned several buildings on its campus to form the Desmond Tutu Conference Center in 2007, an effort that was supposed to bring hotel and conference revenue to the seminary. The anticipated revenue never materialized, and in 2012 the facility was sold to a developer.

Dunkle has been trying to address the school's long-standing financial problems by tightening up operations. Dunkle, who was previously a lawyer, graduated from GTS in 2004 and worked as a diocesan administrator and as a parish priest.

In 2013–2014, GTS enrolled 70 students and had \$10.6 million in expenditures and \$27 million in investments, according to ATS. —Religion News Service; *Christian Century*