

Methodists suspend funding of two seminaries: Claremont School of Theology, United Theological Seminary

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

The United Methodist Church is withholding funds from two of its seminaries until they submit updated financial reports, and one campus—Claremont School of Theology in southern California—will also have to defend its proposed reconfiguration into a multireligious university.

In the meantime, officials at both Claremont and at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, say they are seeking to find sources to cover about \$350,000 in operating costs over the five months before July 1.

“This unexpected shortfall is an incredible hardship,” said Jon Hooten, communications director for Claremont.

The allocations were embargoed with a “public warning” in late January by the church’s 25-member University Senate, which decides whether the denomination’s educational institutions meet criteria to be listed as United Methodist affiliates. After receiving financial audits and other reports from the two schools and visiting their campuses this spring, the University Senate will decide at its June 23-24 meeting whether to ask the UMC General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM) to release the money.

This year’s setback for Claremont came after the seminary rebounded from the edge of losing regional accreditation in 2006.

Under new president Jerry Campbell, the school, located about 60 miles east of Los Angeles, has been balancing budgets, retaining accreditation and working with a \$10 million pledge toward redesigning the seminary’s role within an inter religious

University Project. “We are not proposing to quit educating United Methodist ministers,” school officials told the Century last spring.

But the public warning released January 26 from University Senate president Marianne Inman cited the Claremont seminary’s failure “to consult fully” with such United Methodist groups as the Council of Bishops, GBHEM and the University Senate.

Claremont officials question that claim. Campbell told the *United Methodist Reporter* newspaper that he had consulted with leaders in two regional United Methodist conferences in California about its plans and made reports to the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools and to a team representing the GBHEM and University Senate. “The Senate actually sent a review team out last spring and heard all about the University Project,” Hooten told the Methodist newspaper. “We thought we’d been acting in good faith.”

The 10-year University Project envisions adding new schools on campus to educate Jewish and Muslim clergy as well as educating UMC ministers. “We are in talks with one Jewish rabbinical school and a group of Islamic educators,” Hooten said. “The actual structure of the University Project is still very much in flux.”

Campbell said in an interview last spring that “it is in the Methodist DNA” to foster interreligious understanding and peace in the world. He added that the church needs broad-minded clergy who can create coalitions involving other faiths.

But the “substantial reorientation” of Claremont’s mission and educational setting would require the University Senate to “assess the institution’s suitability for official listing” as a United Methodist affiliate, according to the announcement from Inman, who is also president of Central Methodist University in Missouri.

Neither Inman nor a United Methodist spokesperson said they could comment for this article now that the review process has begun.

The California and Ohio seminaries—two of 13 schools of ministry affiliated with United Methodists—say their finances and enrollments have been in good shape but are endangered by the suspension in funding.

Claremont currently has 225 full-time and part-time students, plus more than 100 doctoral students, taking classes. In the fall, the seminary will begin several new

Ph.D. programs. Claremont board chair Sandra N. Bane, who retired in 1998 from the auditing firm KPMG, said, "I am very disappointed that the church is halting funding during this time of Claremont's growth, especially considering the prevailing economic climate of our nation."

At United Theological Seminary, president Wendy Deichmann Edwards said her school was not informed that the public warning was even being contemplated in January. In a UTS press release posted online January 27, she said the school's fiscal management had been affirmed by regional and national accreditation bodies and by a financial consultant hired by the church's higher education and ministry board.

Deichmann Edwards said it was difficult not to wonder whether there was another agenda at work, according to the press release. For many years, she said, United was pressured by the denomination to merge with another school against the seminary's own best judgment and against the advice of consultants hired by the church itself.

A month later, Deichmann Edwards issued an upbeat report to friends of the seminary. Among the things to celebrate at United, she wrote, is that the number of incoming students has gone from 60 to 190 in the last three years, gifts and pledges more than doubled in the past year and the seminary's online classes will start in the fall. The board of trustees completed the requested audit and financial plans and directed officials to ask the University Senate to end the funding embargo.