

Most full-time faculty at Episcopal seminary in conflict with school's leadership

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) and added sources

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

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NEW YORK (RNS) Nearly the entire full-time faculty at the Episcopal Church's oldest seminary is battling with the school's leadership, although neither side agrees 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, which has produced generations of bishops and noted theologians, and is the only Episcopal seminary overseen by the national church. Last week, eight faculty said 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. The dean and president, Kurt Dunkle, wrote a letter to students saying the Board of Trustees accepted the eight faculty members' resignations. But faculty member Andrew Irving wrote to students saying the professors never suggested they would resign.

“We wish to underline that we have not resigned,” Irving wrote, indicating that the group was seeking legal counsel. “Our letters did not say that we would resign. We requested meetings with the Board.”

Ellen Tillotson, an Episcopal priest in Connecticut and a GTS board member, wrote that the eight faculty had been planning a walkout.

“When offered such an ultimatum, what were we to do? No, they never used the word ‘resign,’” she wrote. “But over and over they said they were unable to continue to do their jobs unless we met unmeetable conditions.”

On Tuesday (September 30), [the Board of Trustees wrote that](#) it had “voted with great regret to accept the resignations of eight members of the Seminary faculty” the previous day.

“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.”

Yet the board is “willing to meet with any former faculty member about the possibility of reconsidering the resignation.”

The eight faculty are charging that Dunkle shared a student’s academic records with people who were not authorized to see them, which would violate federal academic privacy standards. The faculty also say he speaks in ways that have made women and some minority groups uncomfortable on several occasions.

In their earlier letter, the eight faculty laid out concerns with the school’s leadership.

“It is our view that that the President has repeatedly shown that he is unable to articulate sensitively and theologically the issues that are essential to the thriving of the Body of Christ in its great diversity,” the professors wrote in an open letter.

“Moreover his failure to collaborate, or to respond to our concerns when articulated has resulted in a climate that many of us find to be fraught with conflict, fear, and anxiety.”

In its September 30 statement, the Board of Trustees said it was “conducting an internal investigation into certain allegations” related to Dunkle. “Further comment on the investigation, pending its outcome, would not help that process. We

encourage everyone to withhold any further judgment or comment."

The statement added that in the school's nearly 200 year-history it has prepared more than 7,000 leaders. "Dean Dunkle has helped that mission thrive," the board wrote.

GTS, however, is not the only seminary to face questions about its future in a rapidly shifting landscape of seminary life.

The Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has also seen a battle erupt between its dean and faculty. Of the Episcopal Church's 10 seminaries, several are facing financial challenges. Bexley Hall Seminary in Ohio affiliated with Seabury-Western Seminary in Illinois to form Bexley Seabury in 2013.

In 2013-2014, GTS enrolled 70 students and had \$10.6 million in expenditures and \$27 million in investments, according to ATS. GTS had faced about \$40 million of debt that it was attempting to pay down through property sales and redevelopment.

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.

GTS focused its energies redesigning several buildings on its Chelsea campus into 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.

In the present conflict, Andrew Gerns, a GTS alumnus and contributor to Episcopal Café, sought different perspectives.

"As far as I can tell the real issues have to do with the leadership style of the dean and his tendency to 'Lone Ranger' decisions—even correct ones, but also dubious ones—without debate, discussion or buy-in," he [wrote in an Episcopal Café post](#).

"The Trustees, I think, must choose what they understand their primary function to be: let the vision and direction flow from the Dean and President or, alternatively, to be the ones who themselves take responsibility for developing a vision and direction for the seminary."