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How United Methodist seminaries are navigating uncertain future as denomination splinters



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Key Points

United Methodist Church is splintering. A new, more conservative denomination, the Global Methodist Church, launched in May.

Seminaries who educate future UMC clergy pride themselves on tradition of ecumenism and being a home for Methodists with differing opinions. That's now being put to the test.

Global Methodist Church is developing new network of seminaries that, amid some overlap, deviates from that of the UMC. It points to the debate over theological education as part of larger conflict..

Kent Millard is a centrist and a United Methodist. David Watson is a conservative and, most recently, a Global Methodist.

The two work together to run a United Methodist Church seminary.

“He (Watson) and I are trying to model how United Methodist leaders and Global Methodist leaders can work together for the good of the church,” said Millard, president of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

So, under the direction of Millard and Watson, senior vice president and a key adviser to Millard, United Seminary pursued more formal ties with the Global Methodist Church, a new traditionalist denomination that split from the UMC earlier this year.

The Global Methodist Church launched in May after intensifying disagreements over church policy and theological beliefs, including dealing with LGBTQ rights.

Before the split, the UMC had more than 6.2 million members, according to 2020 data. As of 2018, the denomination had more than 12 million members worldwide.

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Explainer: United Methodist higher education and the denomination's splintering

The move by United Seminary was bold because it's one of 13 official UMC seminaries, meaning they receive funding from the denomination. Now, it plans to also prepare future clergy for the Global Methodist Church. That means a different set of courses with different teachers.

"I wish things had not come to this. But this is where we are, so we have to deal with what's in front of us," Watson said. "Given what's in front of us, I'm really grateful to be able to work with the Global Methodist Church to educate pastors."

United Seminary's sibling institutions might not follow in the same footsteps, but they are wrestling with similar questions.

The splintering in the UMC is creating a divergence in Methodist theological education that's challenging seminaries' sense of mission. It's also creating uncertainty about how the UMC and Global Methodist Church engage in future dialogue.

The UMC seminaries pride themselves on a tradition of ecumenism, or representing different Christian traditions, and being a home for Methodists with differing opinions who graduate and become ordained in the same denomination.

Graduates from the 13 official UMC seminaries represent 60% of the people who became ordained in the UMC between 2011-2020, according to data from the Nashville-based UMC General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. The seminaries are everywhere from Boston to California to Texas to Georgia to North Carolina.

Soon, the same kinds of students will look to join the Global Methodist Church, which is developing its own seminary system that, amid some overlap, deviates from that of the UMC.

It's both a symptom and a cause of the larger conflict, said expert Daniel Aleshire, former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools

“You do have a phenomenon when the new group that withdraws from the older group ... they kind of identify a seminary either formally or informally for the education of their ministers,” Aleshire said.

An existing system in a new landscape

So far, United Seminary is the only official UMC seminary to also formalize a partnership with the Global Methodist Church.

In addition to official UMC seminaries, there are other approved seminaries whose graduates are eligible for ordination in the UMC.

“We will be thrilled to educate leaders going into the Global Methodist Church,” said the Rev. Jan Love, dean of Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, another official UMC seminary. “We have deeply conservative students and deeply conservative faculty. And we have very liberal students and very liberal faculty.”

But Love doesn’t see the need for a formal partnership with the Global Methodist Church to do that.

The Global Methodist Church won’t ban its future ordained clergy from attending other UMC seminaries, said the Rev. Keith Boyette, the chief executive for the new denomination.

“But if people are committed to the theological doctrines of the Global Methodist Church, they are probably more inclined to go to seminaries that they clearly see as affirming and teaching those doctrines,” Boyette said.

Conservatives don’t view many of the 13 official UMC seminaries that way.

There’s some truth to that, Aleshire found in a 2018 study he conducted on behalf of the seminaries.

“My observation is that most theological schools are somewhat to the theological left of the constituency they serve — no matter how conservative or liberal their constituency may be,” Aleshire said about the 13 official seminaries.

United Seminary is somewhat of an exception due to changes in leadership and academic offerings.

“United (Seminary) has been more closely aligned with the conservative Methodists in the three decades or so,” Aleshire said. “You go back three decades, it would have not

distinguished itself."

The president before Millard was involved with a conservative advocacy group in the UMC and helped the seminary strengthen ties with Pentecostal partners, a largely conservative tradition, for certain academic offerings, said John Lomperis, a director with a conservative Methodist advocacy group.

Other leaders would take up the mantle, including Watson, who has been a leader in the larger conservative movement in the UMC, and Millard, who has supported conservatives' desire to leave the UMC. In fact, Millard assembled an early group to draft a plan to split the UMC.

Today, even though United Seminary will remain in the UMC per a formal vote by its board, "we want to model amicable separation and collaboration between United Methodists," Millard said.

Churches leaving UMC: United Methodists grapple with schism as 300-plus churches leave across U.S.

Understanding disagreements in UMC: Explainer: What United Methodists are debating as part of their ongoing schism

More conservative alternatives

Different from the UMC, the Global Methodist Church has created a system of preferred seminaries.

Schools apply to be on the list and undergo an evaluation of whether the institutions' doctrinal beliefs are aligned with that of the new denomination.

"We believe that the adversity that has been experienced in the United Methodist Church has largely been a result of the church not taking seriously its doctrine," Boyette said. "It's the cost of teaching the Christian faith, not having adequately prepared clergy."

The institutions already approved or that have applied to partner with the Global Methodist Church reflect that sentiment. In addition to United Seminary, the list includes Wesley Biblical Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, Truett Seminary at Baylor University in Texas, and Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky.

Truett Seminary, though affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, launched a Wesley House of Studies in 2020 under the leadership of a widely revered leader in the conservative

United Methodist movement, Billy Abraham, who has since died. It's now led by Kevin Watson, a Global Methodist Church leader. Wesley and Asbury are not affiliated with a denomination.

Meanwhile, Asbury will be in many ways the flagship seminary for the new denomination. Historically, as an approved UMC seminary, Asbury has been a bastion of traditionalism, educating and employing many leaders of the conservative movement in the UMC and now the Global Methodist Church.

"Asbury has certainly been a main source over the decades of creating this pipeline of evangelical pastors coming into the system," Lomperis said.

Between 2011-2020, 14% of the total number of people ordained in the UMC graduated from Asbury, according to data from the Nashville-based UMC General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

During those same years, Asbury President Timothy Tennant became increasingly outspoken about his views on sexual orientation and gender identity. The seminary also adopted stricter policies for employees' adherence to the seminary's statement of beliefs and has come under fire from critics within and outside the UMC over how it has enforced those policies.

Seminaries have played a significant role in the conflict in the UMC. But they also haven't been at its center, Aleshire said.

In other Protestant denominations that have split, Aleshire said seminaries have been divvied up with little to no crossover. Or, in the Southern Baptist Convention, conservatives took over the seminaries as a key strategy in a movement to pull the entire denomination further to the right, leaving those who left to start new seminaries.

That's not the case here.

"The divide in the United Methodist Church isn't primed by the seminaries," Aleshire said.

Temporary versus long-term problems

Jeffrey Kuan, president of Claremont School of Theology in California, is optimistic the disruptions to theological education caused by the splintering in the UMC will be temporary and minimal.

"I am not letting what is happening in the United Methodist Church distract us from doing what we need to do," Kuan said.

As a progressive in the UMC who oversees one of the more progressive official UMC seminaries, Kuan has faced a fair share of criticism. But it hasn't had lasting effects so far, he said.

In 2019, Kuan organized heads of the other official UMC seminaries to draft a statement urging opposition to a UMC church policy plan dealing with LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage proposed by traditionalists. The seminaries' statement upset conservatives, but not their enrollment in any major ways.

Backgrounding on UMC conflict: A new Methodist denomination announced its official launch. How did we get here?

Global Methodist Church launch: Inside the start of a new traditionalist Methodist denomination and its road ahead

Conservative students continue to enroll at Claremont. "And they have found a place in this theological education that allows them to engage other theological perspectives from their own traditions," Kuan said.

Part of that is due to Claremont's appeal to international students who are from regions where traditional values are more prevalent.

Both Kuan and Love, the dean at Chandler, said the current drama is affecting student recruitment, but out of a general sense of uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile, Love has designated a team of faculty to serve as mentors to current students wrestling with the same anxieties.

At the same time, Kuan and Love don't find the splintering too overwhelming of a distraction. That's because other trends are.

"I think in the greater scheme of things, this will look like a blip," Love said.

Many of the UMC seminaries are dealing with declining enrollment, as many throughout higher education are. Meanwhile, there are projected shortages in church membership and clergy ordination.

"We cannot train clergy fast enough for vacancies," Kuan said.

Believe it or not, there's a greater tumultuousness than the fraying of a denomination.

"All this has been happening in the last 10 or so years already. The splintering is just an added pressure," Kuan said. "Even without the splintering, that's the kind of reality that we in

theological education have been working with.”

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