

UMAction

Briefing



What About United Methodist Seminaries?

As United Methodism liberalizes, U.S. congregations have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in the next couple of months to exit the denomination and keep their properties under new *Discipline* Paragraph 2553, which explicitly expires *soon*!

Discerning churches should consider questions about UMC seminaries.

First, this is a question of **stewardship**. In 2023 alone, \$25.8 million in apportionments is extracted from congregations for the Ministerial Education Fund (MEF), in addition to other apportionments. The MEF subsidizes 13 official United Methodist seminaries in the United States. Staying United Methodist this year is a choice to pay continually into the MEF every year, year after year.

Pastors' seminary years can be personally formative.

The UMC *Discipline* requires most of the MEF to be used for "United Methodist student scholarships" and/or compensation for faculty and staff "who prepare United Methodist students ... for ordained ministry or service as local pastors" at

these 13 schools. But this money frees up funds for other controversial seminary activities noted in this *UM Action Briefing* special issue.

Second, United Methodist seminaries directly affect the **spiritual health of our congregations**. Pastors' seminary years can be personally formative. Any congregation considering "staying UMC" should note the spiritual environments molding United Methodism's new pastors.

Third, there are questions about **moral complicity**. Choosing to permanently chain your congregation to the UMC is a major, long-term financial commitment. This means sharing moral responsibility for the activities documented in this issue and many other media outlets.

United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, is exceptional. While United's president has said that the school will remain United Methodist, an increasingly liberal post-separation UMC may eventually force United to abandon either the denomination or its theologically orthodox identity.

What about the rest of the seminaries?

Radicalism and Other Religions

Many United Methodists are aware that our seminaries often promote theological radicalism and left-wing political extremism, despite several individual theologically orthodox professors. The former includes Drew

Winter 2023 Special Seminary Edition

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Most church members do not know the truth about United Methodist seminaries. (Photo: UMC.org)

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Iliff Embraces Paganism, Atheism

While Iliff School of Theology in Denver has long had a radical reputation, many do not realize how far it has strayed from being a strictly Christian seminary. One current staffer and alumna has boasted, “The Iliff School of Theology is a United Methodist school of higher education but its alumni and students are Hindus, Universalists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics...” Following Jesus is just one option among many.

The seminary’s official “Core Values” say nothing directly about God, Christ, or the Bible. But the seminary has declared that support for LGBTQIA+ liberationist ideology “is a core value at Iliff” and reported that since 2015, “35% of our student body has consistently identified as LGBTQIA+.” The seminary has offered an entire course devoted to “Queer Spirituality in the Visual Arts,” allowing students to explore such topics as “Queer Tarot.”

This is not the only example of Iliff embracing outright paganism. In the

2021–2022 academic year, Iliff publicly celebrated the election of two out of five student government leaders who are openly neo-pagan and use transgender “they/them” pronouns. Per their bios, one worked for “an inclusive Wiccan Church” and the other worked for and was an “initiate” of “the Firefly House in Washington DC—an

organization for Wiccans, witches, polytheists, and other magic workers.” (Wicca is a relatively new religious movement seeking to revive pre-Christian European traditions of witchcraft and nature worship.) The Iliff website elsewhere proudly profiles one of these student leaders, explaining how Iliff helped this seminarian become a better, more diversity-allied pagan leader.

Iliff’s pagan ties run even deeper than celebrating transgendered Wiccans as ideal student leaders. Iliff recently offered an entire course on “Social Justice in Western Earth-Honoring Traditions,” which promised to promote social justice “through the lenses of various modern, Western earth honoring traditions, such as: goddess spirituality/Wicca.” One current staffer boasts in her official bio that she “is ordained with a Norse pagan organization called Forn Sidr of America and serves as their Gudellri/head clergy.” Before her, Iliff’s Coordinator of Academic Administration was an alumna who also served as national president of an organized faction of Unitarian Universalists who identify as pagans. Some years ago at Iliff, as reported by the United Methodist News Service in 2020, Professor **Tink Tinker** engaged in a bizarre ritual of being “able to speak with the man” who was murdered and “ask his permission” for certain things, disregarding clear biblical warnings against pagan practices of consulting the dead!

Iliff also touts its welcoming of atheism. Its website celebrates one alumna serving as a chaplain affiliated with the American Humanist Society, and elsewhere profiles a current professor who “now describes himself as a ‘lapsed Buddhist,’ and a current atheist.” ✨

FOR REFLECTION: *Leviticus 20:6-8; Deuteronomy 12:29-31, 18:9-14; Revelation 22:15.*



Is Iliff pagan? United Methodist seminary is supportive of Unitarian Universalism, atheism, and outright Paganism (Photo: Iliff Hall / Wikimedia Commons)

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University Theological School professor **Melanie Johnson-Debaufre** denying biblical authority, using one lecture to urge church people to, “Invite Paul to be a conversation partner, not one who tells us what to do.” The latter includes Emory University’s Candler School of Theology co-hosting a webinar promoting abolition of police, as well as Claremont School of Theology professor **David Ray Griffin** (recently deceased) energetically promoting bizarre 9/11 conspiracy theories about how the U.S. government actually attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon to justify endless war.

But most do not realize *how far* United Methodist seminary radicalism has gone.

Even Duke Divinity School, traditionally known as relatively moderate, has a strong left edge.

The UMC-supported Interdenominational Theological Center recently strongly promoted support for elective abortion.

Since 2015, the UMC’s Garrett-Evangelical Seminary has devoted an official academic program to promoting LGBTQ+ liberationist ideology.

Iliff School of Theology even-handedly trains Christian pastors alongside promoting a range of other religions, including atheism, neo-paganism, and Unitarian Universalism.

It’s not just Iliff. A strong majority of American United Methodist seminaries openly promote the non-Christian religion of Unitarian Universalism.

All of this is explained in this *Briefing*.

And there’s more.

For years, Claremont has trained Muslim imams to lead and promote the Islamic religion in North America. When this began,

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Good News! Asbury Seminary Co-Sponsors GMC Church Planting

As United Methodism and Global Methodism increasingly diverge, there is good news for the latter. Shortly after the Global Methodist Church (GMC) formally launched last year as the denomination for conservative United Methodists who remain loyal to the UMC's historic, biblical doctrinal and moral standards, it announced a church-planting partnership with Asbury Theological Seminary.

Asbury, a bastion of evangelical Methodism independent of any denomination's control, will now be a main instructor of Global Methodist clergy. Asbury has its main campus

in Wilmore, Kentucky, and extension sites in Florida, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

Per the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by the denomination and the seminary, the seminary will provide up to \$500,000 to help plant new Global Methodist congregations, matched by the GMC. Asbury alumni can apply to receive renewable matching grants of \$5,000, \$10,000, and \$20,000 between now and May 2025 to support their planting of new Global Methodist congregations around the world. Applications will be reviewed by a committee of representatives from both the seminary and the GMC. ✚

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Claremont's president at the time declared that Christians who feel compelled to evangelize adherents of non-Christian religions have "an incorrect perception of what it means to follow Jesus." The United Methodist seminary still offers its own degree program in "Islamic Chaplaincy."

So, multiple United Methodist apportionment-funded seminaries actively promote *alternatives* to Christianity. They form the UMC's future pastors in spiritual environments that treat following Jesus as merely one of multiple valid possibilities.

Except for United and Duke, all U.S. United Methodist seminaries publicly distanced themselves from the 2019 UMC General Conference's affirmation of biblical standards on marriage and sex.

Some went much further, such as Candler School of Theology. In the context of (1) our denomination's rules officially forbidding "self-avowed practicing homosexual" ministers, and (2) many regions openly defying these rules, the official response of this apportionment-funded seminary bragged, "For more than a decade, Candler's Methodist Studies Program ... has operated a placement service for UMC LGBTQIA+ persons whose home annual conferences will not ordain them," helping them find "conferences that will ordain them." Apparently Candler is helping people unwilling to live by the UMC's moral standards to infiltrate its clergy ranks.

Pastors trained at such seminaries are increasingly unlikely to hold a traditionalist position on marriage.

Future Trajectory

The UMC's 2016 General Conference was the high point of conservative voting strength. But even that conference saw virtually no traction for a petition to redirect MEF funding away from seminaries who "offer any course work, degree program, or formal certificate explicitly designed

for training" people to lead and spread non-Christian religions. This commonsense proposal was defeated overwhelmingly in committee, getting only 21 percent support, despite conservatives strongly lobbying for it.

Now with the UMC split, such reforms have lost many of their strongest proponents. And with fewer conservative United Methodists left to appease, these seminaries may become even more liberal.

In recent years, clear majorities of newly ordained U.S. United Methodist ministers have attended one of the 13 official United Methodist seminaries, driven by major financial incentives and soft pressures. Meanwhile, UMC authorities have increasingly restricted the number of approved non-UMC seminaries, seeking to corral UMC ordination candidates into one of their 13 seminaries. As the denomination's U.S. membership collapses, with ongoing membership decline now accelerated by our denomination's split, financial pressure on United Methodist seminaries will grow, pressuring bureaucrats to continue closing off other seminary options in order to survive.

Pastor **Bryan Bucher**, a founding leader of the United Methodist "Centrist" Movement, has already declared his desire to block any graduates of independent, evangelical Asbury Theological Seminary, long a main source of traditionalist United Methodist pastors, from ordination in the post-separation UMC. So, we can expect fewer new traditionalist pastors to be available for traditionalist congregations remaining in the UMC.

If your congregation wants your future pastors to be theologically orthodox and does not wish to fund these liberal United Methodist seminaries, you have one limited, rapidly expiring opportunity to exit the denomination. ✚

ACTION: To find detailed documentation for the facts reported here about United Methodist seminaries, as well as for other key factors driving the UMC split, visit www.umchoices.org

Most United Methodist Seminaries Tout Unitarian Universalism

At least nine of the 13 official United Methodist seminaries in America, in various ways, support Unitarian Universalism! The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) is historically rooted in denying the divinity of Jesus Christ, affirming automatic universal salvation of all people, and views all religions as equally valid.

Despite these profoundly anti-biblical beliefs, several United Methodist seminaries—including Claremont School of Theology, Saint Paul School of Theology, Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, and Wesley Theological Seminary—have promoted outside scholarships for their Unitarian Universalist (UU) students. This shows a willingness to take Unitarian Universalist money without much apparent concern for compromising each school's spiritual culture.

Some United Methodist funded seminaries—including Wesley, Boston University School of Theology (BU-STH), Iliff School of Theology, and the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO)—even boast of offering courses whose sole purpose is preparation for UU ordination. Wesley's course catalog explains that it “has frequently provided specific courses required of other mainline denominations,” listing the UUA alongside several Protestant denominations.

Some go even farther. BU-STH includes an official Unitarian Universalist Community of Learning (UUCL), developed with the UUA, “to form a community of students, faculty, and staff dedicated to nurturing and preparing Unitarian Universalist students for future leadership and service in and through the church.”

MTSO has an entire Unitarian Universalist House of Studies, which “serves degree-seeking MTSO students and provides hybrid and intensive classes for UU students who are preparing at other seminaries.” MTSO boasts of being “a perfect seminary setting for preparation to serve within the Unitarian Universalist Association,” due to its “progressive approach to issues of social justice, race, gender, sexuality and ecotheology.” MTSO also offers a formal Unitarian Universalist Studies Specialization “for students preparing for either Unitarian Universalist religious leadership or advanced academic studies in a Unitarian Universalist-related field.”

Other United Methodist seminaries promote Unitarian Universalism in other ways. Emory University's Candler School of Theology lists UU churches among its “approved sites” for seminarians seeking ministry internships. So, Candler is actively helping UU congregations fill staff positions to promote their

non-Christian religion. In 2021, Drew University Theological School hired Dr. **Sofia Betancourt**, an ordained UU, as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, touting how her “scholarship and teaching in womanist, Latina feminist and *mujerista*, and environmental theoethics resonates deeply with Drew's mission and shared values.” For aspiring social-justice warriors, Claremont's website provides a “Protest Chaplain's Handbook,” which is explicitly “[g]rounded in Unitarian Universalism.” In a webpage seeking donations, Claremont highlights a short list of



The Methodist Theological School in Ohio campus in Delaware, OH (Photo: MTSO / Association of Theological Schools)

exemplary alumni, including a national UUA staffer and someone “preparing to be an interreligious chaplain, ordained in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, a calling [she] discerned while learning at Claremont.” Iliff's profiles of exemplary alumni similarly includes one who was drawn into the UUA while at Iliff.

All of this goes much further than intellectual curiosity, genuinely Christian ecumenism, or seeking good relations with non-Christians. A strong majority of U.S. United Methodist seminaries have made profoundly spiritual choices to effectively treat as non-essential the divinity of Jesus Christ and the importance of faith in Him for salvation. They deliberately support the spread of a non-Christian religion. Some are openly proud of being places where some are drawn into Unitarian Universalism. ✚

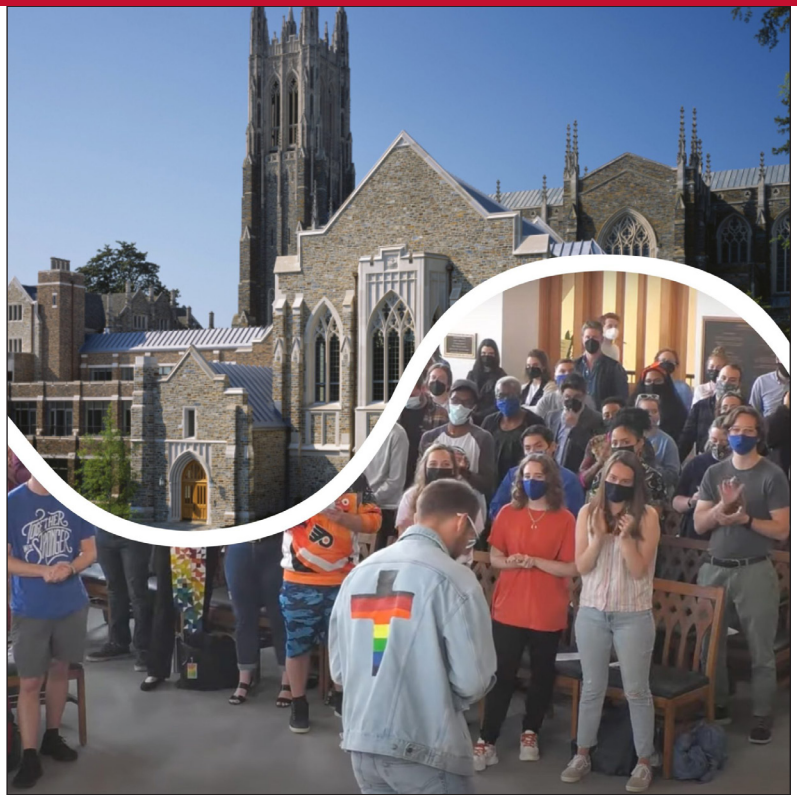
FOR REFLECTION: John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

Duke Divinity Students Worship ‘Queer God’

Praying to “the Great Queer One,” many students at the UMC’s Duke Divinity School devoted an entire worship service last year to claiming God’s support for LGBTQ ideology and relationships.

Divinity Pride, a student group affirming the “dignity, faithfulness, and strength of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and gender/sexuality non-conforming Christians,” sponsored the service.

“Strange one, fabulous one, fluid, and ever-becoming one,” prayed one Master of Divinity (M.Div.) student in opening the service. She stated that God is “mother, father, and parent” and “drag queen, and transman, and gender-fluid.” Another M.Div. student declared that God is a “queer God” who loves “every part of us.” Another, a self-identified trans woman, defended



Duke Divinity School students lead a pride worship service in Durham, NC (Photo: YouTube screen capture / Association of Theological Schools)

See Duke Divinity Students Worship ‘Queer God’ on page 6

Seminary Offers ‘LGBTQ Studies Concentration’

Since 2015, the UMC’s Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in suburban Chicago has offered a formal “LGBTQ Studies Concentration” for Master of Divinity students. Despite the seminary receiving generous United Methodist funding, this formal academic program appears designed to train students in ideological opposition to the UMC’s biblical, historic moral standards disapproving of homosexual practice.

This concentration is offered in partnership with the United Church of Christ’s Chicago Theological Seminary.

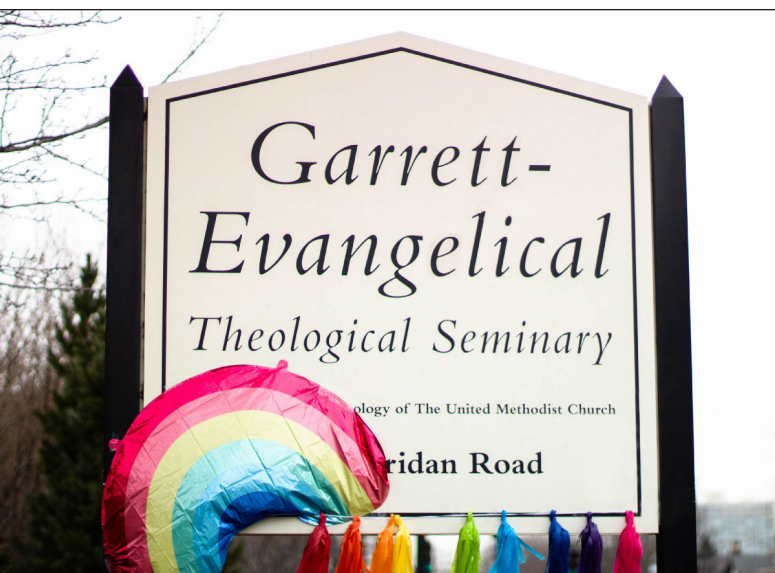
Relevant recent courses have included “Queer Eco-Spiritualities,” “Feminist, Womanist, and Queer Ritualizing,” “Queer Theologies,” “Queering Worship,” and “Queer(ing) Soul Care.”

That last course’s professor, **Rolf Nalasco**, directs Garrett’s Institute for Spiritual Formation. Nalasco’s preferred pronouns are he, him, and “siya” (*siya* is a Tagalog pronoun that can mean both “he” and “she”) and he recently used the United Methodist seminary’s website to denounce “the punitive and harmful theology and polity of the United Methodist Church toward queer clergy.” Per its syllabus, his course encouraged students to explore such topics as “a queer God,” “a queer ecclesiology,” and/or “queer(ing)” biblical texts related to homosexuality, as part of a required project of “queer theologizing.”

Furthermore, the seminary’s recruitment coordinator, **Grant Showalter-Swanson**, is a United Methodist minister openly married to another man, in defiance of church rules. This likely drives away prospective students who are theologically orthodox.

The seminary continually sends the UMC new clergy who are not only formally trained to oppose biblical morality on marriage and sex, but who may be eager to enlighten our congregations with their “queer liturgies” to “a queer God” and reshape the church according to their “queer ecclesiology” and “queer theologizing.” A little yeast leavens the whole dough. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: 1 Corinthians 5.



A sign for Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary with a rainbow balloon. (Photo: Northwestern Business Review)

Duke Divinity Students Worship 'Queer God'

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gender transition as biblical, offering a strained, transgenderist interpretation of Jacob's wrestling with God in Genesis 32.

The historically moderate seminary's left edge is seen elsewhere.

Dr. **Robyn Henderson-Espinoza** is a self-described "non-binary transqueer Latinx," prominent activist, and a Duke Divinity consulting professor who uses "they/them" pronouns. In 2021, Henderson-Espinoza delivered an invited lecture at Boston University School of Theology, another UMC seminary, linking "white supremacy and capitalism and violence," and attacking not just racism but "whiteness" as something that "breeds scarcity and breeds a kind of selfishness."

In a recent NPR interview, Rev. Dr. **Amy Laura Hall**, associate professor of Christian Ethics and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke Divinity School, demonized conservative United Methodists. Amid conspiracy-mongering against IRD/*UMAction*, she broadly suggested that supporters of the UMC banning non-celibate gay clergy were guilty of *unforgivable* sin, denouncing this policy as "a sin against the Holy Spirit." When asked about ethical concerns in the UMC's debates, Hall decried how one annual conference had hired one theologically orthodox staffer. So much for the new UMC still including conservatives. ✚

ITC Promotes Abortion Rights

The UMC's Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta is not a stand-alone seminary. Rather, it pools resources with several other historically black seminaries to jointly form the "unique model" of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC).

Shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court's reversal of its infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision (so that states may now restrict or outlaw elective abortions), the ITC promoted an online protest hosted by a female faculty member, who urged people to "organize at this moment to reclaim reproductive justice as the law of the land" and "discuss how we can mobilize against the overturning of *Roe*."

A few years ago, the ITC website published a "pro-choice" editorial by its then-president. This role model for future pastors displayed callous indifference towards unborn human life, admitting that in counseling "numerous young women and couples" considering abortion, he "never" discouraged abortion. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *Psalm 139:13-14; Matthew 25:40; Luke 1:39-44.*

UMAction Briefing

A newsletter for United Methodists seeking a biblically faithful and evangelistically fruitful future for our congregations

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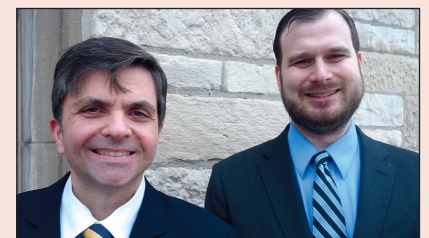
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