

Seminary rebounds, plans multifaith university: Claremont School of Theology

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

On the verge of losing accreditation in 2006 during its third straight year of bleeding red ink, the Claremont School of Theology faced an uncertain future. Some faculty members left the United Methodist-related seminary nestled near scenic mountains in southern California, and a new president was hired whose expertise was primarily in directing seminary and university libraries.

“We had spent too much, and we didn’t really have a clear pathway out,” said CST president Jerry D. Campbell, recalling in an interview the crisis he inherited three years ago. Once a school goes on probation or, worse, loses accreditation, “you can bet your bottom dollar that the student population will decline,” Campbell added.

Had the Claremont school not reversed the trend, it surely would have been victimized by the current recession, which has forced drastic budget cuts at many Protestant seminaries. Instead, the school is fresh off probation, enjoying a balanced budget and touting an ambitious plan to build around the seminary a multifaith, multicultural graduate university “to create active rapport among religions” for dealing with world problems. The seminary would be one of five schools in the university project.

Campbell, whose last position was overseeing the libraries and computer systems at the University of Southern California, began his Claremont task in mid-2006 by downsizing the staff and finding revenue to support plans for major changes.

“Jerry Campbell has done a stunning job,” said Joseph Hough, who was dean at Claremont from 1975 to 1989. “He has the potential to attract significant funding for the school’s new direction.”

Hough himself was widely applauded last year for rescuing struggling Union Theological Seminary by raising \$30 million in capital funds during his nine-year presidency at the venerable New York City school. Hough then started a long-delayed retirement in California, but was recruited this winter to serve as interim president of Claremont Graduate University.

One key to the bounce-back at the Claremont School of Theology is a \$5 million pledge by an unnamed donor to support the multireligious university project, Campbell told the Century.

“We are not proposing to quit educating United Methodist ministers,” he said. “But we are pretty convinced that steeping people in their own juices doesn’t create a broad-minded leader who can go out and create coalitions and work with other groups,” he said.

CST trustees gave the new project the go-ahead in March. Other developments in recent months:

- Seminary officials learned in March that the Western Association of Schools and Colleges accrediting agency had lifted CST’s probation. Also, a review team from the Association of Theological Schools that visited the campus in October and February has told Campbell that the seminary is in compliance with its standards as well.
- The school, with an enrollment of about 250 students, took two steps in February to ease seminarians’ financial burdens. The board kept tuition at the same level for all degree programs in the 2009-2010 academic year. And the faculty voted to reduce the number of units required for the three-year Master of Divinity degree from 90 to 81, thereby decreasing the chance that students will have to spend a fourth year—a common experience.

“We looked at the phenomenal debt load that seminarians are beginning to acquire from student loans,” said Campbell in faulting the “irresponsibility of the entire system” of training pastors. “It’s almost unconscionable to graduate students into a low-paying environment with large amounts of debt.”

- With the help of a Ford Foundation grant, the seminary organized a succession of separate meetings on campus this year for theologians, mainline denominational leaders and seminary officials to explore partnership in “transformative thought for progressive action.” A mixture of noted theologians, progressive evangelicals and emergent-church thinkers met in March, and denominational officials will meet at the end of May.

While Claremont School of Theology has been known as a relatively liberal seminary as well as a center for process theology, it is rarely associated with interreligious studies. One exception: professor emeritus John Cobb’s past roles in Buddhist-Christian dialogues. But CST’s latest brochure states flatly that it is “transforming into a university of religion, where scholars and practitioners of all perspectives can . . . work toward the repair of the world.”

“I’ve been asked, ‘What does this do for Methodism?’” said Campbell, 63, an ordained Methodist minister who was a library administrator at three UMC seminaries—Illiff School of Theology in Denver, Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University and Duke Divinity School. For nearly a decade, he worked at USC in Los Angeles, a private university that housed CST’s predecessor Methodist seminary for the first half of the 20th century.

Campbell says he suggests to church traditionalists that “it is in the Methodist DNA” to foster interreligious understanding and peace in the world. Founder John Wesley pieced together an ecumenical theology that was “part Moravian, part Lutheran, part Anglican, part Catholic, part Calvinist,” he said. “So I don’t find the proposed university project out of keeping with the spirit of John Wesley.”

The existing school of theology and ministry would be complemented by four other schools whose names and descriptions are still in flux. One is tentatively called the “school of ethics, politics and society.”

Another, the esoteric-sounding “world spiritualities and healing arts” school, will cover pastoral care, religious education and spiritual formation, according to Jon Hooten, CST director of communications.

“We fully expect that process studies will have a strong presence in the schools,” Hooten added, referring to the philosophical-theological thought pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne and Cobb.

While noting with a smile that he's aware of the saying, "Often wrong, but never in doubt," Campbell said he believes "the money is out there" for the project—on the basis of his experiences at SMU, Duke and USC whenever large expansions were envisioned.

"In all their backroom discussions, there would be people who said, 'You're crazy. We'll never raise this kind of money,'" he said. "There was always someone—typically the president or someone on the board—who would say, 'If this institution wants to play in the big leagues, then this is what it needs to do.'"

Some perspective on the Claremont seminary's history was provided by Hough, who taught and held administrative posts from 1965 through 1989 not only at CST but often simultaneously at Claremont Graduate University.

Hough credited Campbell for "a dramatic initial solution to the fiscal crisis" that has bedeviled the seminary off and on since its founding. Former member of Congress and Methodist pastor Bob Edgar "successfully led the first moves toward financial stability" as CST president before he left in 1999 to lead the National Council of Churches out of its financial perils.

Neither Hough nor Campbell mentioned Philip Amerson, Edgar's successor as CST president, not wanting to fault him for the seminary's budget relapse. Amerson in 2006 was offered the presidency of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, and he still leads that Methodist-related school.

One of Campbell's initiatives at the Claremont seminary ruffled feathers at Claremont Graduate University, however. The seminary has received approval from the western regional accrediting agency to award Ph.D.s in New Testament, Hebrew Bible and religion and ethics. Seminary faculty often taught such classes in the past but CGU granted the degrees.

Hough, in his temporary post as president of Claremont Graduate University, said in a prepared statement that he was "disappointed" at the "significant disruption" caused by CST's taking over the three doctorate programs. But the statement also expressed hope for some new level of cooperation as both schools move ahead "with their own programs featuring interreligious and comparative religious studies."