

Seminaries in a multifaith setting: Claremont, Andover Newton, Meadville Lombard

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

Officials at the Claremont School of Theology, which has a long-term project to create a multifaith university and seminary campus, breathed a sigh of relief in late June when United Methodist Church agencies released about \$350,000 in funding and reinstated the school's standing in the church.

"I think the review came about in the first place because some people were worried that we were turning a United Methodist-related seminary into something very different," said Jerry D. Campbell, president of the California school. He said Methodist clergy will still be taught at Claremont and they will be better prepared for a diverse society when the campus is affiliated with schools educating Jewish and Muslim religious professionals.

Also in June, Andover Newton Theological School outside Boston and Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago announced that they have agreed in principle to form an interreligious theological institution. The projected consortium, to be based in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, and launched in June 2011, will allow the two seminaries and any others signing on to retain their names and traditions under one corporate umbrella, according to Nick Carter, president of Andover Newton.

Meadville is selling its four-building campus but will keep its academic operations largely in Chicago, engaging in long-distance learning programs. The "theological university" concept, according to Meadville president Lee C. Barker, seeks to strengthen the faiths and identities of all seminarians, "not water them down."

As unusual as the interfaith concept sounds, "we've been doing this for decades," said James Donahue, president of the Graduate Theological Union based in Berkeley, California. The GTU includes three Roman Catholic seminaries, five in mainline

Protestant traditions, and a Unitarian Universalist seminary, plus centers for Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist studies. “We welcome others to this approach, but it is not new,” he said.

“There are two trends at work now—one financial and the other theological,” Donahue said in an interview.

“Theological schools are looking for financial sustainability in a declining religious market,” he said, alluding to large numbers of clergy out of work and many small churches unable to pay decent salaries. Theological schools have had to reduce budgets sharply because of recession-related factors.

Second, “providing an interreligious context for the preparation for ministry and dialogue makes perfect sense in today’s world.” Rather than contributing to amorphous views of religious faith, he said, such a context allows “the particularity of each religion [to be] clarified for those of other traditions.”

The Claremont project was criticized as a liberal step by R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky: “Liberal Protestantism long ago grew embarrassed by the exclusive claims of biblical Christianity and the historic Christian faith.”

In reacting to conservative Protestant critics on the Religion Dispatches Web site, Philip Clayton, who teaches theology at Claremont, conceded that his seminary will face challenges to maintain high educational standards in order to avoid “a syncretistic blending that pulls the new university away from any clear Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) identity.”

But Clayton accused conservative seminaries of fighting interreligious education by building ever-higher walls of isolation. He praised the achievements of GTU in Berkeley and a center for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut as signs of a more fruitful trend.

Claremont officials announced June 9 that an independent Jewish rabbinical and cantorial school, now based near UCLA, and a Los Angeles-based Muslim school for imams and scholars have agreed to become affiliates.

Last winter, Andover Newton Theological School and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in New York State broke off merger talks. Carter, the Andover

Newton president, said the agreement with Meadville is a “good fit,” with the two schools “socially and politically aligned on many issues.”

Andover Newton has links to the United Church of Christ and American Baptist Churches and has previously had many Unitarian Universalist students. Carter noted also that Hebrew College Rabbinical School established a campus on land bought from Andover a decade ago, and in 2008 the two academic neighbors formed a center to cultivate relationships between their students and faculties.