

Gammon, the UMC's only Black seminary, is finding its future

by [Jim Patterson](#)

September 9, 2024



Alumni, faculty, and supporters cut the ribbon on the renovated student lounge at Gammon Theological Seminary. From left are Kylan Pew, Sharma D. Lewis, Gammon president Candace M. Lewis, board of trustees member Mackie Norris, Alfred Norris, and Katurah Johnson. (Photo by Mike DuBose, UM News)

The day before a low-key August 15 ribbon-cutting for a new student lounge at Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta, the rest of the building was still a work in progress. Brown builder's paper covered floors, plastic tarp protected walls, and furniture and piles of boxes were waiting to be unpacked in unpainted rooms.

Leading a tour of the compact campus, Candace M. Lewis—president of Gammon since 2021—injected bright colors and ebullient confidence wherever she roamed. Wearing a multihued dress and her trademark high-top Chuck Taylor Converse sneakers, Lewis clearly saw things others hadn't envisioned yet.

"Wherever God gives vision, there's provision," Lewis said. "We have more than enough vision to go around, and as we share vision, I feel like that really does invoke generosity."

Lewis and her small staff are reinventing the only historically Black United Methodist seminary with distance learning as well as seeking new partnerships and sources of funding. And after more than six decades of being accredited through the [Interdenominational Theological Center](#), Gammon is now going through the process of getting its own Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

The ITC, a consortium of historically Black schools, declared financial exigency in April of 2023, indicating a severe financial crisis. The ITC includes Morehouse School of Religion as well as schools associated with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the Church of God in Christ.

“I didn’t anticipate the crisis of exigency,” Lewis said. “That just felt like the bottom was falling out of the school. But what I learned in that process is that in every crisis, there’s an opportunity.”

Because of the declaration of exigency, Gammon was forced to transfer all of its students to other institutions to finish their degrees, which Lewis said was “the lowest point.”

“So we had to settle down and be prayerful,” she said. “Ask the Lord, ‘What is the opportunity in this crisis?’ So now, 18 months later, we’re getting ready to launch as an independent school.”

Lewis said she is confident that by the time the new fall class graduates, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools accreditation will be secured.

Renita Weems, a respected biblical scholar, teacher, theologian and author, has come aboard as chief academic officer, a position the ITC used to provide. Weems said revitalization efforts are helped by Gammon’s rich history of producing Black clergy and leaders.

“There are students—United Methodist but also non-United Methodist—who are interested in attending a historically Black theological institution and would appreciate it being one of maybe three that are online across the country,” Weems said. “So I think there’s a market.”

Like the other 12 United Methodist seminaries in the US, Gammon is getting less financial support from the denomination’s [Ministerial Education Fund](#) due to a [reduced budget](#) and the disaffiliation of about a quarter of US churches over how

inclusive to be of LGBTQ people in the life of the church. The denomination's [general conference recently removed bans](#) on gay clergy and same-sex weddings.

From 2016 to 2023, the UMC scaled back its support of Gammon by nearly half, from \$728,034 to \$367,513, according to the [United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry](#).

Gammon gets the least support of the 13 United Methodist seminaries in the US, primarily because the number of students and ordinations are large considerations in the funding formula. For the fall 2024 semester, Gammon has about 20 students, Lewis said.

[Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University, also based in Atlanta, got nearly \$1.2 million from the denomination in 2023. Candler enrollment for the 2023-2024 academic year was 419, according to Candler spokesperson Claire Asbury Lennox.

Alfred L. Norris, former Gammon president, said this funding formula has to change in order for Gammon to remain one of the UMC-affiliated seminaries.

“We are always smaller,” he said. “There has to be some attention given to the fact that we are still a viable seminary in the United Methodist Church, and therefore we need more support from the church because we can’t get the kind of support from other sources that we need.”

In a statement, Roland Fernandes, the top executive of the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, said “anticipated budgetary changes will be a major adjustment for all of the UMC’s work.

“It is too soon to commit to any changes in the disbursement of the Ministerial Education Fund.”

Lewis estimates Gammon has three to five years to raise enough money to be self-supporting. And a big part of the president’s job is seeking partnerships and contributions to get there. A multimillion annual fund campaign is being prepared to launch in the fall of 2025 or spring of 2026. The monetary goal has not yet been set.

Lewis believes as a change agent with an established record, she is the right person for the Gammon job.

“If you look at my ministry track record, I’ve always been an innovator,” she said. “The Florida Conference hadn’t started a new African American church in 20 years. So right out of seminary, that was my first appointment to start a church. That church is 27 years old, and it’s still going.”

Lewis also worked for [Path 1](#), a branch of [United Methodist Discipleship Ministries](#) that innovates and equips church leaders to start and sustain new and vital congregations and ministries.

Now she is back at Gammon, her alma mater.

“The school really needed a type of leader that could give them more options related to their future, and I’m gifted in visionary, transformational leadership,” she said.

Already, Gammon has started offering hybrid online and in-person classes. The school has also partnered with Spelman College to make 51 units of housing available. And, next year, Gammon will launch an online certificate program for people interested in learning as well as pastors interested in continuing education in topics like womanist and liberation theology. A center for Latino/Latina studies is being planned for possible launch in January 2025.

“I feel like Gammon is needed now more than ever before,” Lewis said. “Our commitment to train leaders to be just and generative in the world is needed now more than ever.”

Even on a celebratory day, Lewis continued to look ahead with ambition. She said she’d love to use scholarship funds to offer every student a 50-percent tuition discount.

“So I’m going to be hitting the streets hard this fall,” she said. “That’s why I got my tennis shoes on, because I’m going to do a lot of running, a lot of walking, because I got to build some strong partnerships.” —United Methodist News