

Enhancing the Integrity of Theological Education in The United Methodist Church:
Actions Undertaken by the United Methodist University Senate

January 26, 2011

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been a time of great change in theological education. New challenges and new opportunities arise regularly in almost every arena that affects United Methodist-related theological seminaries, as well as schools from other traditions, as they strive to provide education for “developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world.”¹

The University Senate, through its Commission on Theological Education, works diligently in the midst of these changes to insure that all candidates for ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church have access to seminaries with “institutional integrity, well-structured programs, sound management, and clearly defined Church relationships.”² Moreover, the Senate, through the work of the Commission, establishes “the criteria that must be met by...theological schools to achieve and retain listing as institutions affiliated with The United Methodist Church.”³ They are published in the “Criteria for Evaluating Non-United Methodist Schools of Theology” contained in Appendix B of The University Senate: Organization, Policies, and Guidelines, approved January 2007.

The Commission and the Senate pledge to communicate clearly, consistently, and in a timely way with all stakeholders in fulfilling the Senate’s obligations. This statement attempts to improve our outreach in this regard by explaining changes that have occurred in the processes and style of work of the Senate and the Commission in recent years and reporting actions taken at the January 2011 meeting.

¹ One of the four areas of focus for The United Methodist Church.

² The University Senate, The United Methodist Church: Organization, Policies, and Guidelines. Approved January 2007.

³ The University Senate, The United Methodist Church: Organization, Policies, and Guidelines. Approved January 2007.

The demographic realities of The United Methodist Church and some other Protestant denominations have a substantial impact on theological education. The Association of Theological Schools reports that the number of students interested in pursuing the Master of Divinity degree has declined in recent years and is now fairly flat. The number of seminaries offering such degrees, however, is getting larger, as is the number and kinds of degrees they offer. Moreover, noteworthy numbers of theological schools founded in earlier eras are now concentrated in geographic areas where the population of prospective students has declined substantially. One of the consequences is that increasing numbers of seminaries face growing challenges in meeting the “Criteria for Evaluating Non-United Methodist Schools of Theology,” including providing “institutional integrity, well-structured programs, sound management, and clearly defined Church relationships.”

Because of these and other changes, the Senate, through the Commission, began a new process in 2004 of inviting non-United Methodist seminaries to be considered for approval by the Senate. This was a departure from previous procedures when institutions took initiative to apply for such status. Being listed as an approved non-United Methodist seminary has always been a privilege, not a right, and is subject to regular review, as shown in Appendix B. Since 2004, however, any initiative to have a non-United Methodist seminary approved for listing has been at the discretion of the Senate, on the recommendation of the Commission.

In recent years, careful application of the “Criteria for Evaluating Non-United Methodist Schools of Theology” demonstrates the growing inability of many schools approved in earlier decades to provide the quality of education that The United Methodist Church expects. Although some United Methodists clergy and lay persons in close geographic proximity to these schools may have deep affection for and loyalty to these institutions, careful, systematic scrutiny of their programs related to United Methodist students demonstrate weaknesses in many institutions’ ability to respond to the needs of the UMC for educating “principled Christian leaders for the church and the world.” Under such circumstances and

after careful review, painful decisions about delisting an institution must be considered seriously in close communication with all affected parties, including bishops of the UMC and other ecclesial leaders. The frequency of such outcomes is likely to increase as the expectations and requirements of The United Methodist Church take priority over the needs of any particular non-United Methodist seminary.

Alongside these developments are revolutionary changes in the pedagogical platforms. Online education is a growing opportunity for innovative teaching that will likely reduce the role that geography plays in all of higher education, including theological education.

Having carefully considered these matters, the Commission on Theological Education recommends to the Senate that:

1. All United Methodist seminaries and Asbury Theological Seminary be allowed to offer two-thirds of the Master of Divinity degree online, with one third of the degree required to be in residence.
2. The only “online courses” allowed to count toward a degree for a candidate seeking ordination in The United Methodist Church be offered by one of the 13 official United Methodist seminaries and Asbury Theological Seminary.
3. The Senate reconfirm its June 2010 decision to require that all official transcripts of University Senate Approved Schools identify the courses that are taken online. For this purpose, the term “online courses” includes those that offer some instruction on campus.
4. Effective January 2011, few if any additional seminaries will be invited to join the list of non-UMC schools approved for the education of those seeking ordination in the UMC.
5. All non-UMC schools currently approved for education of UMC candidates for ordination must continue to meet the “Criteria for Evaluating Non-United Methodist Schools of Theology” contained in Appendix B of The University Senate: Organization, Policies, and Guidelines. A necessary means of fulfilling these criteria includes either (a) having at least one full-time UMC faculty member with a PhD or ThD employed on a long-term contract teaching the course(s) in

UMC history and doctrine, (b) or partnering with a United Methodist seminary to offer the required courses in history, doctrine, and polity. This policy will take effect in August 2012 and will be applied as schools are regularly reviewed.