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Special trustee committee to decide future of Southern's Carver school

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A special trustee committee will be appointed to determine the future of the Carver School of Church Social Work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The study committee will be appointed in April and report to the full trustee board next October with a recommendation either to keep the social work school in its current form, change the school or discontinue it, said David Dockery, seminary vice president for academic administration.

The future of the Louisville, Ky., social work school came into question March 20 when seminary President Albert Mohler fired Diana Garland as dean of the Carver School. Garland was removed after she told the school's 117 students Mohler had instituted restrictions which would make recruiting additional faculty impossible.

The school's future is in "serious jeopardy," she said.

Now the Carver School faces challenges on at least two fronts: accreditation and philosophy.

Accreditation is an issue because the Carver School soon will fall below the minimum number of full-time faculty members required by the Council on Social Work Education, an accrediting agency for social workers. The accreditation issue is further compounded by the turmoil created by Garland's firing.

Philosophy is an issue because Mohler has said he believes the predominant philosophy of social work is "not congruent" with his understanding of theological education.

Current students in Carver School degree programs are worried they may not be able to complete their degrees before the seminary loses accreditation from the Council on Social Work Education -- an action they perceive as inevitable. Representatives of their student organization already have consulted legal counsel about a possible lawsuit against the seminary for breach of contract.

Seminary officials, however, have said they will make every effort to ensure that all current students are able to complete an accredited degree whether the Carver School remains open or not.

"In good faith we would find a way to help them finish their programs here at the seminary or to work out an agreement with other institutions so they would accept our students," Dockery explained.

Dockery said he can't predict what decision the trustee committee will make regarding the Carver School's future.

While Mohler has said it is not his goal to close the school, he has declared its future depends on finding a way to reconcile his understanding of the seminary's overall mission with the philosophy of church social work.

One area of particular contention is Mohler's strong condemnation of homosexuals. In a recent speech in North Carolina, he called homosexuality one of the greatest sins possible and said acceptance of homosexuality has led to the downfall of Western civilization.

This appears to be in conflict with the guidelines of the Council on Social Work Education, which state that all master's degree programs in social work must "prepare graduates to practice with diverse populations."

"Each program is required to include content about population groups that are particularly relevant to the program's mission," the guidelines say. "These include, but are not limited to, groups distinguished by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, age and national origin."

Further, the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics requires social work professionals to "act to prevent and eliminate discrimination against any person or group" on the basis of sexual orientation and other factors.

Regardless of the ultimate decision on the Carver School's future, Garland's firing cast a pall over the campus in the days immediately afterward. She is popular and respected among both students and faculty and has not been perceived as promoting a political agenda of any kind as the seminary has moved in a more conservative direction.

"There's a pain and grief and sadness over this as great as any event that has hit our campus," Dockery said.

Dockery praised Garland as a "pioneering faculty member" who has served the seminary with "capable, creative and visionary leadership" and "level-headed administrative work."

"She has been a model of godly leadership, exercising her role with both conviction and discernment, offering challenge when needed and hope for the discouraged," Dockery said.

"It is impossible to calculate the impact of this decision on the life of the seminary and its future," he added.

Representatives of the Carver School's student body and alumni also praised Garland and have begun a campaign to have her restored as dean.

Carver School students delivered a letter to Mohler March 22 in which they presented seven requests, including Garland's reinstatement as dean.

The other student requests include:

- Additional dialogue between Mohler and Carver students.
- Written statements about how the seminary will provide for completion of social work degree programs.
- Public explanation of Mohler's positions on homosexuality, abortion and women in ministry.
- Formal approval by trustees of all processes for choosing seminary faculty and public notice of those criteria.
- An explanation from Mohler on why he believes the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics is "not congruent" with biblical and theological values and ethics.
- Adherence to established seminary procedures in recruiting and interviewing prospective faculty members.

Social work students, joined by other seminary students, faculty and staff, conducted a peaceful sit-in outside Mohler's office for several days after Garland was fired.

Andy Patterson, president of the Organization of Student Social Workers, said the student body already has asked three of the seminary's accrediting agencies to investigate recent events on campus.

Carver School alumni met March 21 and 23 to develop ways to support current students and campaign for continuation of the social work school at Southern Seminary.

Alumnus Steve Williams of Louisville said Carver alumni across the nation are being enlisted to help with this effort.

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Carver school recent carrier of long educational tradition

LOUISVILLE (ABP) -- The Carver School of Church Social Work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is only 10 years old, but its history dates to the turn of the century.

The Carver School as it is known today was established by action of Southern Seminary's trustees in August 1984. It is the nation's only accredited social work program operated by a theological seminary.

Graduates of the Carver School work in a variety of roles, including service through Baptist children's homes and church-based relief ministries, as missionaries, family counselors, chaplains and employees of Baptist hospitals and through denominational social ministry programs.

The Carver School's roots go all the way back to formation of the Woman's Missionary Union Training School adjacent to Southern Seminary in 1907. At that time, the seminary enrolled only men.

Baptist women of the Louisville area were instrumental in raising money for this initial effort.

In the early days, students in the WMU Training School obtained field ministry experience through the Baptist Training School Settlement, the Southern Baptist Convention's first settlement house, which served immigrants and others.

From 1921 to 1941, the Training School and Southern Seminary existed in separate locations, with the seminary moving to its current location in eastern Louisville and the Training School remaining in downtown Louisville. The two reunited in 1941 when a new facility for the Training School was built adjacent to the seminary campus.

By this time, the Training School served more than 100 women, who also took some classes with men.

But by 1952, a new religious education school was being planned by the seminary, and more women were transferring to seminary programs. The Training School was renamed Carver School of Missions and Social Work, and a revised curriculum was developed for both men and women.

In 1957, WMU transferred control and management of the Carver School to the SBC due to a funding crisis.

The Carver School and Southern Seminary fully merged programs in 1962, and the social work program was placed within the new school of religious education. At this time, social work was offered as a major within the master of religious education degree.

Southern Seminary began offering a master of divinity in social work degree in 1969.

In 1984, the Carver School of Church Social Work was formed as a distinct school within the seminary, and the master of social work degree was offered, with accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education.

Anne Davis, who still teaches on the seminary faculty, served as the school's first dean until the retirement of seminary President Roy Honeycutt in 1993. At that time, Diana Garland was promoted from within the Carver School faculty to serve as dean.

Observers say new hiring standards will thwart recruitment of faculty

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- New requirements for hiring professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary may have a chilling effect on faculty recruitment and dash the dreams of its new conservative leaders, members of the seminary community believe.

President Albert Mohler has added a four-part litmus test to the seminary's other faculty-selection criteria. And that will thwart the Louisville, Ky., school's efforts to recruit "first-rate evangelical Christian scholars," warned several professors familiar with the seminary's procedure for selecting faculty.

However, faculty and seminary administrators said Mohler believes he is doing what he must do to be faithful to the desires of Southern Baptists.

"I think the president is seeking to be faithful to carry out the responsibilities of his office as he understands his relationship to the trustees and the larger Southern Baptist Convention," said David Dockery, vice president for academic administration. Mohler senses "a stewardship of his office to do what he believes the SBC wants," he added.

The faculty-selection crisis surfaced most recently in mid-March, when Mohler vetoed a search committee recommendation to elect David Sherwood to the faculty of the Carver School of Church Social Work.

Mohler turned thumbs down on Sherwood, director of the social work program at Gordon College in Wenham, Mass., because Sherwood said he could see how God might call some women to be pastors.

That incident led to a standoff between Mohler and Carver School Dean Diana Garland, who told the president she could not find potential faculty who were competent to teach and also could meet his new requirements. Mohler subsequently fired Garland for telling students about the problem, and that left the seminary community wondering whether the Carver School could survive almost certain loss of accreditation.

A faculty meeting two days later left professors despairing as to whether the seminary's other schools might face the same faculty-recruitment predicament as the Carver School. Mohler told the professors he understands the will of the Southern Baptist Convention and Southern Seminary trustees, and he will not approve prospects who do not measure up to their standards.

In addition to affirming the Abstract of Principles, the seminary's founding theological guidelines, potential faculty must affirm the 1991 "covenant renewal" agreement between faculty and trustees, and they must take correct positions on four contemporary issues Mohler believes are central to trustees' aspirations for the seminary.

In an interview, David Dockery, the seminary's vice president for academic administration and dean of the School of Theology, spelled out those new requirements, noting they are matters on which there is clear consensus on the trustee board. Potential faculty must:

-- "Restrict the role of women in the church from the senior pastor/overseer -- the senior office of the church."

-- "Affirm the exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ alone."

-- "Be clear that the Bible teaches that all homosexual behavior is sinful."

-- "With clarity acknowledge 'the sanctity of life' to be pro-life, anti-abortion, except in the most extreme circumstances."

The new requirements apply not only to faculty members who might come to Southern from other schools, but also to current contract faculty who might seek tenure-track positions, Dockery noted.

Mohler's critics on the seminary faculty and outside the seminary claim his new restrictions -- especially regarding views on women in ministry -- will imperil faculty recruitment and the ongoing health of the seminary.

In her statement to social work students March 20, Garland said Mohler's requirements would make it impossible to find qualified faculty for the Carver School of Church Social Work.

Faculty sources said this especially is true for the social work program because the pool of faculty candidates is so small. Finding a Baptist with a doctorate and a master's degree in social work who also fits Mohler's criteria is like looking for "the needle in the haystack," one professor said.

This is not true for the larger faculty, Dockery replied. But he admitted Mohler's restrictions will "narrow the prospect list" and exclude some "very fine if not outstanding evangelical/Baptist scholars."

"However, I don't think it means we cannot find good and capable prospects to come and join our faculty," he said. Sherwood is the only faculty candidate who has been rejected by Mohler after proceeding so far through the selection process, he added.

However, three other candidates withdrew at the point of answering Mohler's questionnaire on new requirements, he said. Those candidates were up for positions in theology, Old Testament and church music.

Other faculty sources familiar with the process said these candidates withdrew rather than face the prospect of jumping through an additional -- and controversial -- hoop.

Dockery wouldn't go that far, but he said in each case the candidate recognized "that if they did have an interview with the president or trustees that it wouldn't work."

Dennis Williams, the new dean of the School of Christian Education, insisted he doesn't feel the new requirements have hurt his area. "These issues in no way have impacted my school's recruitment," he said.

Williams acknowledged his school recently considered four candidates for a vacancy and put the process on hold. But new requirements weren't the problem, he said.

"Some were eliminated for other reasons, such as 'fit' with our seminary and competency, but nothing heretical," he reported. The search has stalled because it could not be completed before the trustees' April meeting, he added.

"I'm not out of candidates," he said. "I'm just out of time."

But professors familiar with search processes in other schools are concerned about the seminary's ability to attract qualified, not to mention gifted, faculty.

"The faculty-selection process is sort of dead in the water," said Anne Davis, a social work professor and former dean of the Carver School, who now is president of the Faculty Association.

A couple of other professors echoed her sentiments.

"When the seminary leadership professes its desire to become a 'flagship evangelical seminary' but sets such narrow parameters, it limits the faculty it can pursue," said Timothy Weber, professor of church history and one of the newer avowedly inerrantist evangelical faculty members.

"The great middle space occupied by most evangelical seminaries today allows flex on this issue of women in ministry," Weber said. "Trinity Evangelical, Gordon-Conwell, Bethel and Denver (seminaries) all have faculties that have agreed to disagree. ... But the current criteria push Southern Seminary toward the far right. We're not even in the mainstream (of evangelical seminaries) anymore.

"That means our attempt to find first-class evangelical scholars is very narrowed," he added. "We've seen some very fine professors -- the kind the trustees would fawn over. But they never will see them" because the new process won't allow them to get that far.

And that is damaging to the seminary, Weber stressed. "We have lost people this semester who have pulled out of the process over this issue (of women in the pastorate) who would bring glory to this seminary. We have lost them, and we will lose their friends and other scholars in this evangelical orbit. So, we cannot become the evangelical school we're longing to become."

Gerald Keown, an Old Testament professor, points to his colleague Weber as the epitome of "the profile of a conservative evangelical scholar" who would be lost to the seminary now that the new criteria are in place.

"The reality is the kind of gifted professors you would want to attract are never the kind of persons who would fit neatly into pigeonholes," Keown said. "That should be seen as a positive and not a negative. And yet you have a set of criteria in place in which you could have a premier scholar, premier churchman and a committed believer who could be disqualified because he fails one litmus test."

It's a litmus test non-scholars also would fail, he predicted. "I would submit that if such a standard were held up for the most conservative pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention -- if they were held up to such a narrow standard in order to serve their churches -- they too would fail."

The faculty have tried to accommodate the trustees' desires, Keown and Weber agreed, noting faculty search committees have done their best to produce candidates the president and trustees could approve. But the rigidity of the new requirements stymies that process, they said.

Weber expressed a hope that trustees will let Mohler know they don't want the selection process to be so rigid that it excludes the brightest, most devout conservative evangelical scholars.

"I can't imagine the trustees really want this," he said. "The president has made it clear he's operating on board policy, but my hope is that once some of the board sees the difficulty we have in adding evangelical faculty, they could allow a little flex.

"I just don't think they understand the situation. But once they do, ... I'm hoping they will give us a little room when we have to have it. That's all we're asking."

Trustee Chairman Rick White, pastor of First Baptist Church of Franklin, Tenn., could not be reached for comment.

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-- Mark Wingfield contributed to this story.

Faculty hiring restrictions could jeopardize accreditation

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The accreditation of all degree programs at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary could be jeopardized by restrictions on faculty hiring instituted by President Albert Mohler, according to sources familiar with the accrediting process.

However, the most likely result of recent turmoil on Southern Seminary's campus could be loss of accreditation from the Council on Social Work Education. This agency accredits the seminary's Carver School of Church Social Work.

Mohler fired Diana Garland as dean of the Carver School March 20, after she told the school's 117 students accreditation was seriously threatened by Mohler's policies on faculty hiring.

Garland told students Mohler had developed a narrow set of interpretations on current social issues that all faculty candidates must approve before being hired. This restriction made it virtually impossible to recruit qualified faculty members, she said.

That becomes an accreditation issue because the Council on Social Work Education requires schools to keep a minimum of five full-time faculty members. With the previously announced departure of professor Timothy Johnson, the Carver School faculty will number only four at the end of this semester. And other faculty resignations are possible, Garland said.

Garland's firing further threatens investigation by accrediting agencies because of the instability it portends, according to a number of sources familiar with accreditation procedures. Most sources interviewed for this article asked not to be identified because of their current positions or because of not wanting their names to potentially influence the delicate nature of accreditation proceedings.

Nancy Randolph, director of the Council on Social Work Education, said March 22 the agency had not yet determined whether to take action against Southern Seminary. The agency is still gathering information about recent events, she said.

"Our stance is usually to try to work with institutions and programs to help them overcome any possible noncompliance issues if we can," she said. "I don't know what we might be able to do in this situation."

Ordinarily, if a program appears to be out of compliance with accrediting standards, the agency contacts the program's director for comment. That is complicated in this case since the program's director has been fired, she said.

Programs found to be out of compliance may be investigated by the agency's full commission, Randolph said. That body does not meet again until June, although interim steps could be taken before then.

If deficiencies are cited in a school's program, the school could be given nine months to a year to correct the problems, she said. However, in cases where correction of deficiencies does not appear likely within one year, "we move to withdraw their accredited status."

David Dockery, seminary vice president for academic administration, said it is likely the Council on Social Work Education will at least investigate the seminary simply because a dean was fired.

However, other academic sources both inside and outside the seminary community said much stronger action is likely.

"I would think probation at a minimum and probably a suspension or removal of accreditation," said one academic administrator familiar with the issue.

The larger issue, however, is whether the seminary's lead accrediting agency will take a closer look. The Association of Theological Schools accredits the seminary's overall program.

Southern Baptist Convention seminaries have dominated the work of ATS for the past decade as conservatives have captured control of SBC leadership and attempted to move the seminaries in line with their ideology.

Southern Seminary already has been investigated by ATS once before due to tensions between faculty and trustees. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, currently is on probation by ATS because of the way trustees fired President Russell Dilday. And Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., was put on probation by ATS in the late 1980s because trustees attempted to change the way faculty members were hired without changing the seminary's governing documents. Southeastern has corrected its problems and regained full accreditation.

Many observers see a parallel between recent events at Southern Seminary and what happened at Southeastern. Other knowledgeable sources say the situations are entirely different, however.

Sources familiar with accrediting issues said ATS might investigate Southern Seminary now for three possible reasons:

- The turmoil caused by the firing of a dean.

- The use of "shadow criteria" in faculty hiring, requiring things of candidates that are not publicly adopted as official criteria.

- Accusations that Mohler and trustees have violated the "covenant renewal" document, which was brokered between trustees and faculty in 1991 as a means to begin hiring more conservative faculty members.

ATS is notoriously silent on its investigations of member schools. Nancy Merrell, an ATS spokesperson, said she could not comment on possible concerns with Southern Seminary.

However, she did confirm that ATS has a strongly enforced policy that schools should "conduct affairs consistent with their developed policies."

Dockery said he feels certain ATS will want to ask questions about Garland's firing, but he wouldn't speculate about other possible actions by ATS.

"We don't need to jump to any assumption that it will mean a notation or probation or anything," he said. "I don't think that will necessarily happen."

But another source familiar with theological education issues said he believes Mohler's actions constitute "a direct violation of ATS standards."

There are ways of adding the requirements Mohler wants to the seminary's governing documents, but that has not been done, said the well-placed source. That part of the accrediting problem could be solved if trustees would simply amend the publicly stated guidelines for faculty hiring, he said.

Another academic administrator familiar with Southern's case said he sees a different picture.

The seminary's policies grant the president the right to recommend or not recommend anyone he chooses, this person noted. Instead, a violation would occur if the president recommended someone for election without following due process and gaining endorsement by the faculty first, he said.

If the president and faculty continue to be at odds, gridlock on faculty elections could result, he said. "The faculty could reject everybody acceptable to the president and the president could reject everybody acceptable to the faculty."

Another potential cause for ATS to investigate Southern is faculty concerns that the "covenant renewal" document has been violated. Former President Roy Honeycutt brokered this agreement between faculty and trustees as a way for the seminary faculty to become more balanced through a period of conservative appointments.

The last time ATS investigated problems at Southern Seminary, adoption of the "covenant renewal" was the basis of their approval that problems had been resolved.

Gerald Keown, a member of the faculty/trustee committee that drew up the "covenant renewal," said Mohler's efforts to link new faculty requirements to the covenant involve a "revisionist reading" of the document.

"In the very difficult process of that dialogue, never were any of the social-issue agendas that have been introduced recently a part of our discussion," said Keown, a professor of Old Testament. "They never were even mentioned. The emphasis was entirely upon the nature of Scripture and how one would incorporate trustees' concerns in that area into the hiring of faculty."

"In fact, the gymnastics which we did and they did to avoid the word 'inerrancy' now seem almost laughable in light of these developments. Now, we have persons who are avowed inerrantists who are judged too liberal for our faculty."

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-- Marv Knox contributed to this story

Biblical interpretation, not authority focus of faculty hiring dispute

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Interpretation -- not the authority -- of Scripture cost David Sherwood a job at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says the candidate recently rejected for a teaching post at the seminary in Louisville, Ky..

For most of the past two decades, the Southern Baptist Convention has been engulfed in theological/political controversy, ostensibly over the truthfulness and authority of the Bible.

But Sherwood, one of the controversy's latest victims, is a conservative scholar who affirms biblical inerrancy, the watchword of conservatives who gained control of the convention.

Sherwood, director of the social work program at Gordon College in Welham, Mass., was recommended to join the faculty of the Carver School of Church Social Work at Southern Seminary. But seminary President Albert Mohler nixed the nomination because Sherwood believes God might call some women to be pastors.

Sherwood was the top choice to fill a new Carver School vacancy, reported Diana Garland, the school's former dean. Garland was fired by Mohler March 20 for telling students about how Mohler vetoed the proposal and how, she believed, that action imperiled the school.

Sherwood "was more qualified for the position than any other possible candidate," Garland said. She cited "his extensive experience and reputation as a social work educator and his clear, uncompromised voice of leadership for evangelical Christianity within the social work profession as editor of the journal 'Social Work and Christianity.'"

By all accounts, Sherwood was on track to fill the vacancy. He got ringing endorsements from faculty and students alike, gained the endorsement of David Dockery, the seminary's academic vice president, and had a positive face-to-face interview with Mohler, Garland said.

Sherwood also affirmed the seminary's Abstract of Principles and "covenant renewal," the documents which guide faculty selection and teaching.

But then Mohler required Sherwood to provide a written explanation of his perspectives on abortion, homosexuality, "the uniqueness of the gospel in a pluralistic world" and women in ministry -- four issues on which the president says Southern Baptists want absolute conformity.

The next day, Mohler announced he would not approve Sherwood's candidacy for the faculty position, Garland reported. Mohler later disclosed he based his decision on "the candidate's views on the service of women in the pastorate."

After the announcement, Sherwood said he was surprised the process went so well for so far, only to end so abruptly.

"Three weeks ago, I had no idea I would even be a candidate for the Carver School position," he said March 22. "But I felt God's leadership when I was asked to consider it. Step by step, wherever God was leading, I felt like God was in it."

But the imposition of strict adherence to specific views on such sensitive social issues makes meeting the new requirements for a Southern Seminary professorship quite difficult, he said.

"It's a major impediment to being able to join the faculty," he conceded. "It's one thing to be able to accept and affirm an evangelical statement of faith and the Abstract of Principles. But when there are very specific interpretations of Scripture on certain social issues, those do make it difficult."

Sherwood said he feels good about his view on women in ministry, even if it did stand in the way of a new job.

"I'm not ashamed of what I said," he noted. He shared a four-page copy of his entire written response to Mohler's questions.

It includes an eight-part affirmation of the Abstract of Principles, an affirmation of the "covenant renewal," a listing of seven "key Baptist distinctives" and his views on the four additional issues Mohler specified.

His explanation of the "role of women in the ministry of the church" states in part, "In my understanding of Scripture, God's Spirit blows where it wills and certain (but not all) women may be called to any role in the ministry of the church, just as certain (but not all) men may be."

He acknowledges that Christians hold differing perspectives on the issue and appeals for respect and recognition among all parties.

"In all these things, we must see to 'preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, ..." he notes.

In an interview, he said the role of women in ministry is an issue on which conservative evangelical scholars disagree. But that doesn't mean some don't believe the Bible, he added.

"I'm not talking about the authority of Scripture," he said. "That's absolutely not in question. ... We're not talking about wild-eyed liberalism here."

Sherwood is an elder in a church affiliated with the Baptist General Conference.

His faith and participation in his church are vital parts of his life, he said, adding, "I hope people will see I'm not a distracter."

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