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Southern enrollment down 13% but not as much as feared

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Fall enrollment at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary dropped by the largest percentage in recent history but not nearly as much as some had predicted.

Total on-campus enrollment this fall is 1,241, according to preliminary data provided by the seminary's public relations office. That is a drop of 197 students, or 13.4 percent, over last fall.

The fall total includes 286 new students, a drop of about 100.

Observers both inside and outside the seminary community had predicted a significant drop in enrollment this fall, due to controversies that erupted last spring.

The seminary has been undergoing a significant shift toward a more conservative direction that started about 1990 and has been accelerated since the election of Albert Mohler as president in 1993.

Based on fall on-campus enrollment figures, Southern has lost 40.2 percent of its student body since 1990, a pivotal year on two fronts.

That was the year of the Southern Baptist Convention's New Orleans convention, in which conservatives consolidated their control and moderates symbolically washed their hands of the fight by launching the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It also was the year conservatives gained control of Southern's trustee board and earnestly began their push to change the school's direction, with one trustee accusing then-President Roy Honeycutt of "doctrinal infidelity."

The seminary's enrollment dropped 9.2 percent the next fall and another 10 percent the fall after that.

This year's enrollment drop comes on the heels of a spring full of controversy on the Louisville campus, including Mohler's firing of Diana Garland as dean of the Carver School of Church Social Work and trustee adoption of far-reaching changes in the faculty hiring process.

Seminary insiders had predicted enrollment this fall could drop precariously close to the 1,000 mark.

"We're thankful for the students who are here, those who have returned and the new students as well," said David Dockery, vice president for academic administration. "We're especially excited about the enthusiasm of our new students and the positive spirit they have brought to the campus. We believe it is an indicator of good things to come as we move out of this time of transition."

Even with its overall decline in enrollment, Southern remains one of the larger seminaries in the United States.

Over the last decade, Southern's on-campus enrollment has declined 43.8 percent, from 2,209 to 1,241.

Fall enrollments since 1985 and the percentage drop over the previous year are: 1985-86, 2,209; 1986-87, data not available; 1987-88, 2,152; 1988-89, 2,088 (3%); 1989-90, 2,075 (0.6%); 1990-91, 1,885 (9.2%); 1991-92, 1,695 (10.1%); 1992-93, 1,679 (0.9%); 1993-94, 1,534 (6.3%); 1994-95, 1,438 (13.4%).

The fall enrollment figures used throughout this story refer to on-campus students in all degree programs, including Boyce Bible School's undergraduate degree programs.

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Southeastern's rezoning dispute prompts foray into local politics

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, rebuffed in its bid to rezone prime property it owns, now is taking an active role in the election of the town commission that turned down its rezoning request.

Southeastern is encouraging students to register to vote and is polling commission candidates about their opinions on commercial development in Wake Forest, N.C., the small town that is home to the school.

Paul Fletcher, the seminary's vice president for internal affairs, recently wrote candidates for town commissioner, enclosing a list of 13 questions. Among the questions: "Do you favor the seminary effort to sell land along Route 1 ... for commercial development?"

The land was to be sold to a shopping-center developer, but the sale was blocked by vote of town commissioners March 21. At the time, seminary President Paige Patterson, who lobbied for the rezoning, was accused of strong-arm tactics by some commission members. But seminary officials insist their involvement in the zoning vote and election is appropriate and justified.

Southeastern Seminary "is an important part of the town of Wake Forest and has a stake in the services of our community," Fletcher wrote in the recent letter. "As a result, we are asking each of our candidates for commissioner to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the enclosed envelope."

Another question asks candidates if they believe commercial development along U.S. 1 and revitalization of the downtown business district can be achieved together. Other questions seek more general campaign views on community services, including whether candidates favor lowering real estate taxes.

During orientation, the seminary encouraged students living on campus or in town -- about half of the 1,000 enrolled -- to register to vote, the Raleigh News & Observer reported. The seminary employs another 150 persons full-time, many Wake Forest residents, the paper reported.

Registered voters in Wake Forest numbered 3,699 as of the end of August, according to a spokesperson for the Wake County board of elections.

Another group monitoring the November election, Wake Forest Futures, is not taking a position on the seminary's rezoning effort, but one of the group's several goals, "responsible expansion of the town's tax base," could help tilt the election in the seminary's favor.

The group sent its own questionnaire to town board candidates, interviewed them and endorsed five of 12 candidates for the post, including a faculty member at Southeastern, ethics professor Daniel Heimbach.

The seminary has never polled candidates in the past, but it is not unusual for people from the seminary to be active in the community. Rodney Byard, a commissioner not seeking re-election who voted against Southeastern's rezoning request in March, was an administrator at the school 13 years under former president Randall Lolley.

Byard charged the seminary is overstepping its bounds with the questionnaire. "Is it appropriate for the church, which enjoys tax-exempt status, to insert itself into a political campaign? It raises questions of propriety," he told the Raleigh newspaper.

Unlike Wake Forest Futures, the seminary does not plan to endorse candidates, Fletcher said. "We're issue-oriented, rather than candidate-oriented." He said the seminary administration does plan, however, to inform students and employees of candidate responses to the questionnaire.

Southeastern trustees voted in January to sell about 45 acres of more than 300 acres of undeveloped property it owns to an Atlanta-based developer, who wanted to build a shopping center on the busy highway on the edge of town. The sale would have netted the seminary an estimated \$7 million.

Seminary officials argued the shopping center would produce about \$2 million in annual tax revenue for the town and generate hundreds of new jobs. Opponents argued the development would siphon jobs away from the town's central business district.

In a related development, the seminary learned that some of its other land holdings will now be subject to county and town taxation -- a change that could cost the seminary \$13,024 in annual taxes.

County officials recently denied a seminary request for a tax-exemption on the land, worth about \$1 million, because it is not used for educational purposes. The county tax bill is \$7,195. The town of Wake Forest also is expected to assess taxes on the property, estimated at \$5,829.

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-- By ABP staff

Public education under attack, according to report

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Public schools are under an unprecedented attack of censorship, according to a report recently released by People for the American Way.

In its 13th annual survey of challenges to public education, the Washington-based People for the American Way documented 458 attempts in 49 states to challenge the use of certain books, curriculum, policies and programs. Of that total, 338 were attempts at outright censorship of educational materials, the group said.

The success rate of censorship efforts rose to about 50 percent, the survey reported.

"This hasn't been a good year for the freedom to learn in our public schools," said Elliot Mincberg, executive vice president and legal director of People for the American Way. "Indeed, public education in America is under a sustained political attack that is unprecedented in our history."

However, critics of the study countered that the so-called incidents of censorship represent democracy in action.

Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, said People for the American Way "doesn't get it. When a government restricts what its citizens can read, that's censorship. But when parents have input on what local officials do in the schools, that's democracy."

"I want to make clear what we mean by censorship," Minberg countered. "Contrary to what some of our critics claim, this report does not vilify parents who are simply seeking to protect their own children from certain materials." The report does not include parents who seek to have their children "opt out" from particular assignments, he said.

"What we mean by censorship is when anyone -- be it a parent, a school board member or a political group --- tries to ban or limit access to materials by every student for ideological or religious reasons."

Broad-based challenges to public education, such as attempts to reinstate school-sponsored religious exercises, rose from 87 to 120, according to the survey. School voucher proposals also helped account for the increase in broad-based challenges, the report says.

Religious Right groups led the charge in 30 percent of the incidents.

The report represents only a snapshot of controversies, not a comprehensive accounting, People for the American Way said.

"The attacks are bolder, broader and more organized than ever before," said Minberg.

Minberg said that for every reported incident three or four more go unreported.

Bauer minimized the report's significance. "It stretches the limits of the imagination to believe that 458 phone calls over 365 days spread over 80,000 public schools and 15,000 public libraries are some kind of terrible groundswell of social destruction -- that's not even one call per member of Congress," Bauer said.

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Christian Coalition's contract out of step with families, poll says

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Christian Coalition's "Contract with the American Family" is out of step with the mainstream American values it claims to uphold, according to a nationwide poll released Sept. 6.

The Christian Coalition, a conservative lobby founded by televangelist Pat Robertson, has claimed that 60 percent to 90 percent of Americans support the contract's social agenda.

The survey conducted by a research firm for People for the American Way, reported that Americans oppose six of the contract's 10 measures. Four of the contract's measures do have narrow public support, but none by the overwhelming majority claimed by the Christian Coalition, according to poll results.

"The Christian Coalition is out of the mainstream of American public opinion, both in its priorities and its policy proposals," said Geoffrey Garin of Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

A Christian Coalition spokesman was unavailable for comment. A press release from the organization, however, pointed to legislative successes as evidence of grass-roots support for the coalition.

However, former Congressman Tom Andrews, newly elected president of People for the American Way, said that "the notion that the contract is mainstream is simply and demonstrably false."

Among findings in the poll:

-- 58 percent oppose the contract's call for a "religious equality" amendment to the Constitution. Thirty-four percent favor the amendment.

-- 60 percent reject the school voucher proposal that would give parents tax money to send their children to the private and/or religious school of their choice.

-- 57 percent oppose the contract's proposal to reduce the federal government's role in education and 36 percent favor it.

-- 54 percent reject abortion restrictions and ending public funding of family planning organizations. Forty percent support the provision.

-- 59 percent oppose replacing public assistance with private charity, while 32 percent support the proposal.

-- 55 percent oppose a plan to end federal support for the arts and public broadcasting. Forty-one percent support a ban on funding.

Fifty-eight percent of those polled support the contract's call to restrict distribution of pornographic material on the Internet. Fifty-five percent support a provision to provide restitution to crime victims.

The survey polled 1,252 registered voters between July 19 and 22. Voters were asked about each provision in the contract and about what problems confronted the American family.

In the contract, the Christian Coalition said that people of faith are "increasingly distressed by the hostility of public institutions toward religious expression." But among survey respondents, only 20 percent thought "not having freedom of religious expression" was a very serious problem.

On another question, 76 percent said that the Constitution and current laws protect their religious freedom.

The survey showed that respondents agreed with the Christian Coalition that American families are in crisis, but they disagreed on what are the most pressing issues facing families. Voters said they are concerned about affordable child care, enforcement of child-support laws, costs of college education, responsible sex education for young people and expanding job opportunities.

Most of those surveyed said they are pro-family (71 percent) and strongly religious (56 percent). Another 39 percent of respondents said they are born-again Christians.

About one in five respondents said the Christian Coalition "speaks for me." Other statistics showed that more respondents have negative, rather than positive, views about the Christian Coalition (46 percent to 33 percent) and its founder Pat Robertson (34 percent to 25 percent).

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Tutu plans to retire in June 1996

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (ABP) -- Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu plans to retire next June, according to Ecumenical News International.

Tutu, an outspoken human rights advocate during South Africa's apartheid years and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, will leave Cape Town next year to spend a year's sabbatical at Emory University in Atlanta.

A spokesman said Tutu may remain in the U.S. another year, but plans eventually to settle in Soweto, outside Johannesburg, to write and teach.

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