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Samford trustees approve purchase of Carver School

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Samford University will acquire the Carver School of Church Social Work from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary next summer for an undisclosed price, if seminary trustees give their approval Oct. 9-11.

Under terms of the deal, the Carver School would continue to operate on the seminary's Louisville, Ky., campus through the spring of 1997, although after Aug. 1, 1996, it would be controlled by Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., rather than Southern Seminary.

Seminary President Albert Mohler told students about the transfer during a hastily called meeting Sept. 21.

Samford's trustees privately authorized the university's president to finalize the deal Sept. 8, and Southern's trustees are expected to give their consent when they meet Oct. 9-11. The biggest unknown may be whether accreditation by the Council on Social Work Education will transfer with the school.

Mohler said both Samford and Southern have been in conversation with the Council on Social Work Education about the accreditation question, but he acknowledged such a transfer "is something new."

However, Mohler noted that "Samford is very committed to keeping accreditation."

While retaining the Carver School's accreditation isn't certain, it is more likely with the transfer than with keeping the Carver School at Southern, Mohler predicted.

The trustee committee assigned last spring to study the Carver School's future concluded it would be "very difficult" to continue offering an accredited master of social work degree at Southern, Mohler said.

This difficulty is rooted both in the damage done by last spring's Carver School controversy and in the seminary's new faculty hiring policies, Mohler said.

The Carver School controversy erupted last March, when Dean Diana Garland told an assembly of students Mohler's hiring policies were threatening accreditation. Mohler promptly fired Garland as dean, and students began a prolonged protest.

Trustees subsequently embraced Mohler's more restrictive hiring policies and chastised faculty and staff members who had spoken against Mohler's leadership. The new hiring policies require faculty candidates to agree with certain perspectives on social/theological issues, including that God does not call women to serve as pastors.

Garland said it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recruit academically qualified faculty candidates in social work who held such narrow theological positions. Mohler countered that the worldview of social work is "not

congruent at all points" with evangelical theology.

In the Sept. 21 meeting with students, Mohler reiterated that there is a "dissonance, a difficulty" between the seminary's values and the standards of social work accreditation.

Despite repeated questions from students, Mohler declined to offer additional specifics about how accreditation for the master of social work degree conflicts with conservative evangelical theology.

Last spring's controversies and trustee actions prompted three accrediting agencies -- the Council on Social Work Education, the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools -- to schedule a joint site visit to Southern this fall. The seminary faces the possibility of warnings or even probation from the accrediting agencies.

However, resolving questions about the Carver School's future before the Nov. 8-10 accrediting team visit could lessen the likelihood of sanctions, according to source familiar with the accreditation process.

Transferring the Carver School to Samford is "a very positive and constructive proposal" that will protect the interests of both the seminary and current social work students, while ensuring the future of the Carver School, Mohler said.

Janet Spressart, acting dean of the Carver School, agreed that the transfer may be the best possible option under the circumstances.

"I agree that it's a constructive plan," she said. "I'm keenly disappointed that we cannot continue here as part of this seminary community. But the plan offers a hope and future for the school."

While some Carver School students expressed disappointment that the school will not continue as a part of the seminary, others said Samford will be an excellent location for the future.

Terri Cox, a student from Richmond, Mo., said she is "very excited" about the Samford move because she believes Samford is a progressive school with an outstanding reputation.

The proposed transfer should allow most students currently enrolled in the Carver School to finish their degrees in Louisville. The master of social work is a three-year degree, and no new students were admitted to the program this fall.

Mohler said one term of the transfer agreement is that Samford will not charge current Carver School students fees any higher than the seminary's current rates.

Another term, he said, is that Samford must offer employment in the first year to faculty members currently employed in the Carver School. Only two full-time faculty members remain in the school -- Garland and Spressart -- and they have not announced their future plans.

As part of the deal, Samford will acquire the Carver School's name and assets, including 5,200 books, 700 bound periodicals, a list of graduates, names of prospective students and accreditation documents.

Mohler said the seminary will continue to offer a social work concentration within the master of divinity degree program.

However, losing the Carver School could cause the seminary's overall enrollment to take a further hit. On the heels of last spring's controversy, the seminary's enrollment took its biggest dip in recent history this fall.

Carver School enrollment was 117 last year and is down to about 70 students this fall, Spressart said.

Samford officials said they foresee a bright future for the Carver School in Birmingham.

"Relocation of the Carver School to Samford holds the promise of strengthening the Christian social conscience of our university community, training and credentialing dedicated people to serve our Lord, his children and his church," said Samford President Thomas Cortis.

The Carver School could "realize its brightest future under our sponsorship," added Samford Provost William Hull. "We would want to continue very strongly a program of social work education for both church and denominational agencies."

At the same time, Samford may develop additional programs within the Carver School, Hull added. For example, an emphasis in medical social work might be appropriate, in conjunction with the large medical education community currently in Birmingham, he said.

If the transfer is approved, Samford will be the fourth entity to sponsor the Carver School. It began in 1907

as part of the Woman's Missionary Union Training School. The Training School was renamed the Carver School of Missions and Social Work in 1952. In 1957, WMU transferred ownership of the Carver School to the Southern Baptist Convention due to a funding crisis. In 1962, Southern Seminary assumed full responsibility for the Carver School.

Under Southern's umbrella, the Carver School developed into one of five major schools within the seminary. In 1984, the seminary obtained accreditation to offer the master of social work degree. Since that time, the Carver School has been the nation's only accredited social work program operated by a theological seminary.

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Dallas Morning News chosen to receive annual ABP award

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The Dallas Morning News has been named recipient of the Associated Baptist Press Religious Freedom Award, honoring the paper's pace-setting coverage of religion.

During the past year, the Texas paper launched a new weekly religion section, beefed up its religion reporting staff and expanded religion coverage throughout the paper.

The paper's policy of enhanced religion reporting, developed in consultation with religious leaders, "has become a model for other major daily newspapers as they re-evaluate their own religion coverage," said ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner.

The ABP award was established in 1993 to recognize outstanding contributions in the areas of religious liberty and journalistic freedom.

In a letter to Ralph Langer, senior vice president and executive editor at the Morning News, Warner said the paper's new policy is in harmony with ABP's objective of ensuring a free flow of news to Baptists and other Christians. By considering religion a legitimate story, the Morning News also supports ABP's efforts to inform the public about matters of faith, Warner added.

The Morning News is second recipient for the award. Last year the first Religious Freedom Award went to Jack Brymer, who chose to resign as editor of the Florida Baptist Witness rather than compromise his editorial freedom.

This year's award will be presented at an Oct. 6 banquet in Dallas. Keynote speaker for the event will be Oliver "Buzz" Thomas, special counsel for religious and civil liberties at the National Council of Churches.

Associated Baptist Press is a non-profit, independent news service with subscribers including Baptist state papers and about 50 secular news outlets.

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-- By Bob Allen

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