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Accrediting agency issues 'notation' to Southern Seminary

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The Association of Theological Schools issued a formal notation against Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Feb. 21 citing a "general tone" that "impairs the capacity to provide significant theological education and ministerial training."

To the surprise of many observers, however, the accrediting agency did not place the seminary on probation, a more serious step that could have jeopardized the school's academic standing.

The ruling, issued after an investigation prompted by complaints by the seminary's faculty committee, disappointed opponents to seminary president Albert Mohler.

"This is the academic equivalent of the O.J. Simpson verdict," one faculty member said. "If they can't convict on this evidence, they just can't convict anyone."

Mohler said he "takes seriously" the notation given the seminary but is "pleased that no severe sanctions such as probation are even mentioned in the action letter."

"Southern Seminary has not and will not retreat one inch from our commitment to faithful confessional theological education and to academic excellence," Mohler added. He also restated his goal that Southern Seminary be known as "the flagship seminary among Southern Baptists and within the evangelical world."

The ATS Commission on Accrediting placed the notation after a visit to the seminary campus in Louisville, Ky., last November by representatives of ATS and two other accrediting agencies.

That visiting committee cited four areas of concern based on their observations and interviews:

-- Lack of consultation by the trustees and administration with the faculty, specifically in developing policy changes regarding the qualifications of faculty, the procedure for disciplinary action and the future of the Carver School of Church Social Work.

-- Questions about adherence to ATS standards for contract and tenure-track faculty appointed under a set of criteria that now has been changed.

-- Low morale of faculty and students.

-- The need for stronger networks of communication throughout the campus.

The visiting team elaborated on the first of those four concerns.

For example, the team noted, "communication between the board, administration and faculty reflects a lack of trust and candor concerning policy changes under consideration by the board."

Further, the board's statement on qualifications for new faculty, adopted in April 1995 at the president's request, displayed "haste and lack of clarity," despite the long-term consequences of such an action.

The ATS team also said the faculty was wrongly excluded from the process of adopting changes to the hiring process, from creating a procedure for disciplinary action short of dismissal and from the decision to disband the Carver School.

The ATS action came in response to a complaint filed against the seminary administration in April 1995 by the seminary's faculty committee.

In that complaint, made public for the first time with release of the ATS report, the faculty charged that:

-- President Mohler violated accreditation standards by introducing new conditions of faculty employment without appropriate consultation or notification.

-- The president unilaterally imposed new requirements for faculty to attain tenure, and that those requirements were imposed on faculty who had entered tenure-track positions under different criteria.

-- The president's firing of the dean of the Carver School of Church Social Work created a negative environment for education.

-- Due to the president's administrative actions, "the quality of the programs and the general integrity and welfare of the institution are in question."

-- The president's actions violated the Covenant Renewal document signed as a peace treaty between faculty, trustees and administration in 1991. Adoption of the Covenant Renewal document staved off an earlier investigation by ATS.

The visiting team briefly noted four strengths on campus: overall support for the seminary's mission, a commitment to the seminary's place in the Southern Baptist Convention, a desire for the institution to prosper and a "constructive spirit" among faculty.

"Notation" is one of a series of steps available to ATS to enforce standards for accredited members. In a notation, the accrediting agency identifies standards that are not being adequately met. The notation will be published in the association's annual membership list.

Many observers had expected a stronger sanction, "probation," which is imposed by the ATS for a "major inadequacy." If a school on probation does not take steps to remedy deficiencies, accreditation can be withdrawn.

Faculty members contacted for reaction expressed outrage and bewilderment. Many faculty members opposed to Mohler's policies hoped for some stronger sanction.

Faculty members remain under a gag order imposed by Mohler and seminary trustees last spring, so they are not free to be quoted by name in news accounts if voicing disagreement with the administration.

One faculty member said that despite the apparent lightness of the ATS sanction, the one notation given is a severe notation that in some ways could carry as much weight as probation.

"To say the general tone of the school impairs the capacity to provide significant theological education is a strong statement," this faculty member explained.

A spokesperson for ATS said policy prohibits the agency from commenting on findings until 30 days after the affected institutions are notified in writing, to allow them an opportunity to appeal the association's rulings.

In addition to the notation, the ATS also requested a series of update reports to be filed between April 1996 and April 1998.

Specifically, the seminary administration must track the status of all contract and tenure-track faculty appointed before the faculty hiring process was changed in April 1995. The administration also must inform ATS by Nov. 15, 1996, what actions it has taken to address problems noted regarding communications.

ATS will make another site visit to Southern Seminary in spring 1997 "to monitor progress the institution has achieved in addressing concerns identified in this report regarding academic freedom, status of contract and tenure-track faculty, the faculty's role in shared governance and communication among the board, administration and faculty."

ATS has taken stiffer action in the past against Southern Baptist seminaries. In 1994 it placed Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, under two years probation for firing its president, whom

trustees regarded too sympathetic to moderates.

Also, 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.

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Christian persecution subject of subcommittee hearing

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Christians around the world are imprisoned, abused and unfairly treated because of their religious beliefs, witnesses told a U.S. House of Representatives panel Feb. 15.

Religious leaders and Christian rights advocates were among 12 witnesses who challenged President Clinton and the State Department to take a stronger role in stopping the persecution of Christians.

Witnesses told members of the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights that the U.S. government has not responded to the pleas of persecuted Christians.

Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Puebla Program on Religious Freedom, testified about persecutions in China, Vietnam and North Korea. "Today, each of these communist governments attempts to control and restrict Christian worship and activity using diverse means," Shea said.

Shea said China holds more Christian prisoners than any other country. The Puebla Program estimated 200 Christian leaders and clergy are now imprisoned or under some form of detention or restriction because of worshipping.

Witnesses said Islamic countries were responsible for persecution of Muslim converts to Christianity.

Abe Ghaffari, executive director of the Colorado-based Iranian Christians International, said those who leave the Islamic faith for Christianity are arrested, imprisoned and tortured in Iran because of their religion.

Ghaffari also said Christian refugees who flee Iran face persecution in Turkey where they are interviewed by Turkish officials, usually Muslims who often hold little sympathy for the new Christians. Refugees must be recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. In Turkey, the U.N. has left refugee processing to the Turkish government.

Albert Pennybacker, associate general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., urged observers at the hearing to more carefully assess the persecution claims and to respect the "integrity of the resident religious communities."

"What may appear as 'persecution' and indeed is resistance may in fact be the wish to preserve authentic religious and cultural traditions," Pennybacker said. He urged people to listen not only to "the voices of those who enter new settings from outside but the witnesses from indigenous religious voices where such religious persecution may be occurring."

Pennybacker said religious persecution does exist in numerous places around the world. However, he said there are also claims of the "persecution of Christians" in the United States that "appear to us to be excessive, aligned with domestic political concerns and an inappropriate use of so strong a term as 'persecutions.'"

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said the Clinton administration has been "woefully negligent" in dealing with Christian persecution. "This issue has not occupied a significant plane in American foreign policy. It has not even been on the State Department's radar screen," Land said.

Land said it was "unforgivable" that the State Department did not brief U.S. Ambassador to China Jim Sasser on an evangelical movement in China that alleges the torture and imprisonment of its members.

"We believe Ambassador Sasser should be recalled until such time as he can be fully briefed on the extent

of the persecution of Christians in China," Land said.

Land also called for a full investigation to determine who at the State Department was responsible for advising participants not to carry Bibles or religious literature to the recent U.N. Fourth World Conference for Women.

The State Department did not respond to Land's assertions.

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Supreme Court refuses to accept cross-burning case

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court left standing a Florida law that makes it a crime to burn a cross on someone else's property.

Acting Feb. 26, the court turned away without comment arguments by a Jacksonville defendant that the law violates free-speech rights.

The case involved Thomas Davis, a teenager charged with erecting a cross on the property of Atef Abdul-Nour in Jacksonville in 1993 and setting it on fire. Now Davis can be prosecuted under Florida law.

Last year, the Florida Supreme Court upheld the law, ruling cross burning is not protected speech but "one of the most virulent forms of 'threats of violence.'"

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-- By ABP staff

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