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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story updates and replaces the April 6 ABP story "Southern Seminary announces plan to close campus child-care center."

**Southern Seminary reconsiders plan
to close campus child-care center**

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Plans to shut down Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Child Development Center prompted sharp outcries from concerned parents and staff members last week and a swift response from seminary president Albert Mohler.

Seminary officials announced plans April 4 to close the school's child-care program effective July 31. Three days later, however, Mohler pledged to keep the center open at least one more year while seminary leaders study long-term options to meet the seminary community's child care needs.

The initial announcement came in a letter distributed to parents of children enrolled at the child-care center on the campus in Louisville, Ky. Several students and child-care staff members immediately questioned the action.

The child-care center, founded in 1971, currently serves 69 children, including 60 from the seminary community. The center is located in a two-story building that once housed the seminary's school of church music. The facility reportedly needs more than \$1 million in renovations.

Calling the April 4 action "a painful decision," Mohler said, "It was just a business decision. We could not come up with a business plan with adequate income for the center. We're in a competitive market like everyone else."

The decision to close the center was made by the seminary's 10-member executive cabinet, which includes Mohler, four vice presidents and five deans. Their decision followed a study on renovation costs by the trustees' real estate committee.

"I stand behind the (initial) decision that was made, given the information we had, and I certainly stand behind the proposal and actions laid out today," Mohler said during a hastily convened press conference April 7.

In the April 4 letter to parents, Dennis Williams wrote, "If the seminary did the renovation, the cost to the parents to use the center for their children would be prohibitive." Williams is dean of Southern's School of Christian Education and is responsible for the center's operation.

Responding in an April 5 letter to Mohler, Mim Dunlap called Williams' claim "ludicrous."

Dunlap, whose children have attended the child-care center the past two years, said she was insulted that Williams "would presume to know my or any other seminary family's financial situation."

She said closing the center would force seminary families to use private, non-Christian day care centers, "spending the same 'cost prohibitive' dollars somewhere else."

Dunlap's letter also questioned recent cost increases for rent, tuition and other seminary-related expenses "if a seminary family's finances are such a grave concern."

Dunlap noted that the center's announced closing came just one year after seminary officials unveiled a 10-year, \$70 million campus master plan. "I can't help but wonder how another \$1 million would be that difficult to raise," she wrote.

Emphasizing the decision came after several months of review, Mohler said the child-care center's future remained unresolved amid last year's long-range plans. He said seminary officials have no plans to use the building for any other purpose.

Mohler said the child-care center is an auxiliary service designed to pay its own way. "It has not broken even for the last several years," he said, explaining the center's budget "has been somewhat subsidized."

He added, however, that the center's financial concerns appear to be "a resolvable budgetary situation."

Countering claims that the initial decision was based on a belief by seminary officials that mothers should stay home with their children, he added, "We are not philosophically opposed" to providing child care on campus.

"We have reflected upon the information we have gathered the last couple of days and we feel this is the right action," Mohler told reporters. He said he would ask trustees to establish a joint task team "to develop a long-term plan for meeting the child-care needs of the seminary community."

Mohler said the latest decision was made after meeting with parents and child-care center staff members who voiced "some significant, very responsible statements of concern and urgency." He acknowledged those two groups were not consulted by administrators prior to the earlier announcement.

Child Development Center teacher Christy Thomas was among several employees of the center who attended Mohler's April 7 press conference on the front steps of the child-care facility.

"It was a mistake that he didn't talk to the staff and parents first," Thomas said. She added, however, that she is satisfied with Mohler's latest announcement.

"I had no idea that this might happen this fast," she said. "I'm very pleased, especially for the children. This is our ministry."

"We are concerned for these students," Mohler insisted. "The aim of this task team is to point toward the goal of having an ongoing program in child care. One way or another, we need to meet these needs."

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CORRECTION: In the April 6 ABP story "CBF council proposes budget that implements strategic plan," please change the reference in the 8th paragraph to "Bill Montgomery, a retired military chaplain from San Antonio, Texas, ... "

END
