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Report claims Southeastern  
misses marks in 3 of 4 areas

By Marv Knox

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary does not conform to some accreditation standards in three of four areas of institutional life, according to an accrediting agency report.

A special study committee of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on Colleges visited the Wake Forest, N.C., school Sept. 14-16, and seminary officials released its report in December.

Both of the seminary's accrediting agencies -- the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada -- are investigating the Southern Baptist Convention school.

The studies follow 15 months of change at Southeastern.

In October 1987, the trustee's new conservative majority succeeded in altering the way the school chooses its teachers. The process placed more responsibility with the president, who is accountable directly to the trustees. It also dictated that temporary faculty appointments, which had been the prerogative of the president and the dean of the faculty, must be approved by the trustee instruction committee.

President W. Randall Lolley, Dean Morris Ashcraft and six other administrators subsequently resigned. Lolley and Ashcraft cited the policy changes -- which they interpreted as ensuring that only biblical inerrantists could be added to the faculty and as dismantling their apparatus for allowing faculty leadership in selecting new teachers -- as the reason for their decisions.

Trustees elected Lewis A. Drummond, evangelism professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., as president in March. A new dean has not been elected.

The Southern Association committee's report says Southeastern does not conform to some elements of its accreditation criteria with regard to faculty selection, academic freedom, and organization and administration. And while it does not cite violations of its criteria concerning the effectiveness of the institution, it raises "serious questions" concerning that issue.

Regarding faculty selection, the report cites four areas of concern.

The first involves eligibility requirements for faculty membership. "The conflict with the criteria arises from recent actions and statements by the board of trustees and its members which indicate that an additional criterion has been introduced as a requirement for faculty membership," the report says.

The report identifies belief in biblical inerrancy as a new requirement for faculty eligibility and notes "that the additional requirement was adopted without consultation with the administration or faculty of the school, that there has been no formal board action, that the procedures for amending the bylaws have not been followed, and that published statements do not accord with present practice. It appears that the seminary's traditional understandings of faculty eligibility have been informally and arbitrarily changed."

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The second concern, faculty participation in appointments, has been "redefined as consultative, and its former role to designate and to recommend candidates was assumed by the trustee committee on instruction," the report states. "It would be difficult to overestimate the effects of these actions on the faculty. Their sense is that they have been effectively removed from the process and that their ability to exercise their responsibility has been seriously curtailed. Certainly it would appear that the board of trustees has exceeded its policy-making functions and is presently engaged in the administration of academic policy and appointments."

The third concern, selection of part-time faculty, involves a change in policy that removed responsibility from the president and dean and vested it with the president, with approval of the trustee instruction committee. "This change in policy has had any number of unfortunate consequences," the report notes. "First, the arbitrary nature of the decision ... overturns established procedure and has created immense confusion in efforts to maintain an orderly curriculum. ... Second, the action essentially removes faculty from participation in such appointments and further curtails their ability to fulfill their academic responsibility."

The fourth concern, the dean's selection process, involves a "lack of clarity about procedure (that has) created an impasse," the report says. It cites "apparent misunderstandings" between faculty and trustees, with the faculty operating according to previous procedure and trustees conducting a search according to the same procedure as for faculty appointment.

The report describes the four faculty-selection concerns as "deleterious to the life and well-being of the seminary." It adds: "Apparently the board of trustees considers changes in the makeup of the Southern Baptist Convention a mandate to change the character of the seminary. It has sought to bring this about by rather arbitrarily infringing upon the established traditions of the institution and ignoring its integrity."

Turning to academic freedom, the report says, "The seminary is not functioning effectively as a scholarly community at present; nor is it functioning in conformity with the criteria."

Theological seminaries have a right not to employ teachers whose views are "substantially at variance" with the schools' founding principles, the report acknowledges. But new trustees who have sought to follow what they believe to be a convention mandate to hire biblical inerrantists on the faculty have done so "without regard for due process, institutional traditions and principles of academic freedom," it says.

The report cites 10 allegations that academic freedom has been violated, including the SBC Peace Committee's 1986 investigation of "the theological convictions of faculty members without due notification and faculty participation"; "intrusion of the board of trustees into traditional areas of faculty prerogative through the expanded role of its committee on instruction"; trustees' "interrogation of applicants for faculty positions concerning their views of biblical inerrancy"; trustee visits to classrooms without prior notification or professors' consent; "denial of married student housing to a divorced minority female student with one child on the grounds that hers does not constitute a legitimate family"; and "a general academic environment characterized by distrust, distress and disenchantment."

Addressing organization and administration, the report notes: "The current board understands well its accountability to the Southern Baptist Convention and rightfully is attentive to its wishes and desires. In fact, ... the majority of the board of trustees expressed to the committee and have expressed publicly that it is their intention to make the seminary into the kind of institution they understand the majority of the Southern Baptist Convention desires.

"The board of trustees, however, should also be mindful of its obligation to the seminary as an institution in its own right. ... The charter granted to this institution, and under which it operates in the state of North Carolina, makes demands upon the board, too."

The report faults the board for failure "to keep itself free from 'undue pressure from political, religious and other external bodies,'" as required by Southern Association policies. Similarly, the reports finds "the seminary again not in compliance with (the guideline) which requires 'protecting the administration from external pressures.'" And it says the seminary violates Southern Association policy by failing to give faculty a "meaningful role" in "shared governance" of the school.

The report reminds individual trustees of requirements that "no individual committee or member of the board can take official action for it unless authorized to do so." It says of faculty: "They have an obligation to seek a solution, too. They must take the initiative to seek ways to be in conversation with the board and its leadership. ... They, too, must be reminded to avoid airing grievances in public."

While the report does not cite violations of Southern Association guidelines regarding institutional effectiveness, it says: "Institutional effectiveness is low at this moment in the history of the seminary. ... The effect of recent changes in governance has had serious, adverse impact upon institutional effectiveness."

Examples of "institutional ineffectiveness" include "open and public conflict between the faculty and the trustees"; "the prolonged impasse over the appointment of a new dean"; "delayed appointment of faculty members for the spring term, 1989"; and "decline in enrollment (that) has serious implications for financial stability."

Trustee Chairman Robert D. Crowley, pastor of Montrose Baptist Church in Rockville, Md., said the trustees' instructional committee has responded to the Southern Association, but the response will not be made public until it is considered by the full board.

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Southeastern leaders promise  
cooperation, commitment to SBC

By Marv Knox

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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary officials have promised to cooperate with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools while maintaining their commitment to the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Southern Association -- which, along with the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, accredits the seminary -- recently released the report of a special on-site committee that investigated the Wake Forest, N.C., school this fall.

Both accrediting agencies are examining Southeastern Seminary following trustee-initiated policy changes and subsequent resignation of the school's president and seven administrators.

The Southern Association committee's 25-page report says the seminary does not conform to some accreditation standards in three of four areas of institutional life: faculty selection, academic freedom, and organization and administration. It says the committee also has "serious questions" regarding the fourth area, institutional effectiveness.

Southeastern President Lewis A. Drummond was out of the country and unable to comment directly on the report. However, seminary administrators released a prepared statement in which he said: "The report is very thorough and makes several suggestions. They made recommendations relative to the general effectiveness of the seminary, faculty selection, academic freedom, organization and administration.

"It is our desire to follow these recommendations as forthrightly as possible in the light of our commitment to Southern Baptists. The report is being carefully considered. Each recommendation will be discussed individually by the administration and trustees."

The statement also included comments made by trustee Chairman Robert D. Crowley, pastor of Montrose Baptist Church in Rockville, Md.

"We want to cooperate in all reasonable matters to keep accreditation in conjunction with the mandate of the Southern Baptist Convention, which founded the school, purchased the campus in 1950 and substantially supported the institution since then, having contributed over \$4 million in the current year," Crowley said. "That mandate calls for institutions and agencies of the convention enthusiastically to support the doctrinal statement entitled the Baptist Faith and Message of 1963.

"We desperately want peace in the SBC and peace on the campus of SEBTS with the teachers and students, but not, of course, at the cost of action which refuses to honor its commitment to the parent organization, the SBC, which faithfully supports it each year with tithes and offerings."

Crowley also expressed the desire to maintain both accreditation and loyalty to the convention: "We want very earnestly to keep our relationship with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. We will do everything we can to work out the difficulties within their principles of accreditation and the commitment we have to the owners of the school, the Southern Baptist Convention."

A faculty leader and a member of the trustees' moderate minority both praised the Southern Association's report.

"The faculty was very pleased with its fairness and with the outcome. We felt like we were heard," said C. Michael Hawn, professor of church music and president of the Southeastern chapter of the American Association of University Professors. "They pressed hard the issues of faculty related to the hiring process and upheld our concerns regarding adjunctive (part-time) faculty."

Faculty input in faculty hiring is important "because they know best the needs," he said. "It's impossible for a single person to know who should be hired in any given area of faculty -- who are the best people in Old Testament, church music, theology. It is important that faculty have a significant voice.

"Plus you're talking about collegiality, if you want us to work together. That has been important at Southeastern -- how will this person work with the group. We feel that's very much threatened now."

Faculty feel several key issues now confront the seminary, Hawn said, citing selection of the dean of the faculty, a similar investigation being conducted by the Association of Theological Schools, the trustees' March meeting and their response to the SBC Peace Committee, student and faculty morale, enrollment and seminary finances.

"The report identified the problems that lead to those issues," he added. "Those all point to the big issue: What is going to be the nature of education at Southeastern, and how will we survive?"

Hawn declined to make a prediction concerning Southeastern's loss of accreditation. "I can't tell. It's a very slow, deliberate and comprehensive process. There are a lot of steps and possibilities before they say, 'no accreditation,'" he said. "But it has been made clear by the SACS report that serious things will happen if trustees don't change their ways."

"It's fair and objective," trustee Mark Caldwell, pastor of University Baptist Church in College Park, Md., said of the Southern Association's report. "It certainly depicts a seminary under siege. It's an accurate account of some reckless and rather irresponsible behavior on the part of the trustees."

The report "demonstrates some things some of us (moderate trustees) have been saying; things that were dismissed as 'sour grapes' but were expressions of our concern," he added.

Trustees can take several steps to comply with the Southern Association's report, he said.

First would be to support a motion he plans to make at the March board meeting, which will "rescind the action of October 1987 which changed the faculty-selection process," he noted. "I'm hoping the body will accept my motion in March and demonstrate we are serious about correcting the abuses and excesses that they (the Southern Association) have commented upon."

Another step would be to select a new dean from within the present faculty, he added, noting: "That would also show the new majority (of trustees) is attempting to affect a balance. It would show they are trying to have parity. We need to rethink the whole matter of the faculty's place in faculty selection."

The seminary probably will not lose its accreditation soon, Caldwell predicted: "As long as we're making a good-faith effort, I think SACS will give us time to make the corrections. I think they'll be patient, but we've got to correct the abuses we've perpetrated."

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However, he criticized the process seminary leaders have begun to take in dealing with the Southern Association. A group of trustees met with Southern Association officials Dec. 10 and provided a response to the agency's report.

"Nobody told them to make a report to SACS," Caldwell said. "We empowered them, as our minutes clearly state, to make a report to us."

Crowley disputed that claim. "The board asked me to appoint a special committee to report to the Association of Theological Schools and to SACS," he said. "I appointed the instructional committee. We have answered them point by point, paragraph by paragraph. It's a committee report; it has not been approved by the board. When they approve it or act on it, then it will be released."

The report to the Southern Association is about 100 pages long, with about 50 pages of appendices and illustrations, Crowley said, noting it completes a portrait left unfinished by the Southern Association's report.

"The SACS report is very unbalanced," he said. "Our response provides balance. When you see our response, you will get a balanced picture of Southeastern Seminary."

He declined to make a specific prediction about the fate of Southeastern's accreditation. "I really have no idea," he said. "If they read carefully our response, I don't think there's any basis whatsoever for even citations" of need for correction.

The accrediting process at Southeastern now rests with both accrediting agencies, Crowley said, noting trustees and administrators now await the agencies' reactions to trustees' responses to investigating committees' reports.