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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP)-Citing a need for classroom space, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary officials have announced plans to close the school's Child Development Center.

The transition of Rankin Hall from day care to teaching space was one of several changes detailed in a revised campus master plan approved by trustees at a meeting where they also adopted a resolution against "open theism."

In addition to closing the day care, the master plan outlines transforming a 76-year-old auxiliary gymnasium into two large classrooms and selling the 251-unit Village Manor Apartments to a private company, which will renovate the complex and maintain it as a low-income housing facility.

Seminary President Al Mohler characterized the Child Development Center's closing as a "forced option" based on the need for more classrooms.

"We are forced by enrollment gains to make difficult choices and must look

to other options for child-care needs," he said in a statement.

Three years ago, the seminary announced plans to close the center but reversed that decision after an outcry from those who had children enrolled in the center.

Currently, 72 children are enrolled in the center, according to seminary spokesman Lawrence Smith. Of those, 23 are students' children, 12 are employees' children and 37 are children of community residents.

According to data provided by the seminary for publication in the Southern Baptist Convention Annual, Southern has experienced enrollment growth in recent years, after a period of enrollment decline.

In the 1992-1993 academic year, the year before Mohler became president, the seminary reported a full-time equivalent enrollment of 1,792. For the 2001-2002 academic year, the latest for which comparable data has been published, the seminary reported an FTE enrollment of 1,731.

While essentially steady compared to a decade before, FTE enrollment has rebounded from a low point of 1,163 in 1997-1998. After Mohler's first year in office, FTE enrollment dropped annually for four years, then began to move forward annually beginning in 1998.

The seminary has experienced exponential growth in its Boyce College undergraduate program, which now counts more than 600 students.

Also, while FTE enrollment has returned to its previous levels, the number of graduate degrees awarded by the seminary remains below its former mark. In the 1992-1993 academic year, the seminary awarded 443 master's and doctoral degrees, 42 percent more than the 257 degrees awarded in 2001-2002.

Mohler told the board the campus expansion plan is necessary to keep the

seminary on “war-time footing,” prepared to meet the needs of churches.

Churches are seeking ministers from Southern Seminary at a rate that exceeds the number of graduates produced annually, he said.

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