

Richmond seminary budget shortfall leads to faculty layoffs

April 16, 2008

Posted: 4/16/08

Richmond seminary budget shortfall leads to faculty layoffs

By Robert Dilday

Religious Herald

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP)—Faced with “worrisome” financial challenges, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond will downsize its faculty and staff, the school’s president announced.

Four full-time professors and at least three administrative staff members will be let go in an effort to reduce costs, said seminary President Ron Crawford, who was elected to his position about a year ago. Though he did not release the names of the professors to be dismissed, Crawford said he has communicated with each one, and the school is offering severance packages that exceed a full year’s salary and full personnel benefits.

The 19-year old seminary is burdened with a \$6 million debt and faces a significant deficit in its budget this year—about \$450,000 out of an overall budget of \$3.6 million, Crawford said in a statement distributed to the school’s alumni and supporters.

“Our immediate fiscal challenge is related to the capital campaign that was completed last summer as I became BTSR’s president,” he said. “The

campaign included the purchase of two buildings along with two unanticipated financial challenges: significant debt and a payroll that overreaches annual revenues.”

BTSR, which enrolls about 160 students, currently employs 15 full-time professors and about 16 administrative staff, including the president and dean of the faculty. About 14 visiting and adjunct faculty members also teach classes.

The school’s campus is adjacent to Union Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian institution, and the seminary owns buildings that once housed Union’s Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

At a meeting in mid-March, BTSR’s board of trustees asked Crawford to devise a downsizing plan and present it at a called trustee meeting in late April. The president informed the seminary community of the developments at a March 28 meeting of faculty, staff and students.

“Once the downsizing is complete we will be left with a tenured faculty member in each of the disciplines we have traditionally covered, with the exception of one, where a visiting professor will be employed,” said Crawford. “With nine full-time faculty members, at least three visiting professors and other adjunct faculty members, we will continue to have a profoundly strong faculty.”

Crawford also said that the reduced faculty will have less impact on BTSR than it would on most seminaries. The school is part of the Richmond Theological Consortium, which includes Union Seminary and its School of Christian Education, as well as the school of theology at nearby Virginia Union University, a historically African-American Baptist institution. Students in the consortium’s schools may take courses at any of the institutions for no additional cost.

“On the administrative side, we are losing three and a half positions,”

Crawford said. “Our idea is to replace full-time support staff with part-time students. We’ll train the students on the business inner-workings of a nonprofit, church environment. It should be a win-win.”

Founded in 1989, BTSR was one of the first institutions established by moderates who began leaving the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 90s. Though a number of other moderate seminaries and divinity schools have sprouted since then, many former Southern Baptists still retain passion for the first one, and Crawford is counting on that to get BTSR through the financial strain.

“I continue to say, ‘The future of BTSR is very bright, the short-term is worrisome,’” he noted. “BTSR will survive and, eventually, thrive. We fully anticipate going through a few very lean years. We will use the time to restructure and refocus our efforts on responding to the challenge of providing theological education in a 21st century world.”