

As Mohler reshaped seminary, he shaped a generation

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (RNS)—Not long after he was named president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Al Mohler stood in front of the student body in the school's chapel to take questions.



Al Mohler speaks to a forum as the newly selected president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky, in 1993. (Photo courtesy of SBTS via RNS)

The room was tense. More than a few students, not least the women who had come to the seminary to train to be pastors, were unhappy the board of trustees had elected Mohler. The 33-year-old editor of a Georgia Baptist paper had no experience running any educational institution, never mind a school with nearly 2,000 students.

During the question-and-answer session, one of the students asked how Mohler would supervise faculty members who were much older—and presumably wiser—than he was.

“I intend to age,” he said, provoking laughter and cutting some of the tension.

Thirty years later, Mohler has kept his promise.

“That’s one of the most faithfully fulfilled pledges ever made by a human being,” said Mohler, 63, in a recent interview.

Influence extends far beyond seminary campus

For three decades, Mohler has been one of the most influential leaders among Southern Baptists and the broader evangelical movement, explaining their theology to the outside world and promoting conservative values often at odds with societal trends.



Al Mohler said the Southern Baptist Convention is within its rights to remove Fern Creek and Saddleback because it “has the sole responsibility to establish its own membership and to define what it means to be a cooperative Southern Baptist church.” (BP Photo by

Sonya Singh)

Mohler runs an op-ed section at the *World Magazine* website, helping to shape evangelical views on morals, faith and—above all—politics. A never-Trumper in 2016, he supported Donald Trump four years later.

When Rick Warren, founder of Saddleback Church in California and a legend among Southern Baptist Convention megachurch pastors, challenged the denomination's ban against women pastors at this summer's annual meeting in New Orleans, Mohler was selected to go toe-to-toe with Warren.

Yet Mohler's outspoken views and penchant for controversy can overshadow another truth about the longtime leader. His seminary is thriving at a time when Christian higher education is in turmoil and many other seminaries are selling off their campuses or consolidating and the number of students pursuing Master of Divinity degrees plummets.

"He is one of the most-omnicompetent people I know," said longtime friend Danny Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Akin, who worked at Southern in the early years of Mohler's tenure, attributes his former boss's staying power to a combination of a relentless work ethic and a very thick skin. Mohler has also proved himself capable, Akin said, of digesting theological tomes while managing the often complex finances and egos of a major educational institution.

Long tenure for a seminary president

Those skills, rather than the mere passage of time, have made Mohler the second-longest-serving president in Southern's history, outdone only by Duke K. McCall, who led Southern from 1951 to 1982—a record Mohler plans to surpass.



Al Mohler (Photo/Amber Dion)

Mohler also is one of the longest-serving seminary presidents in the country, according to 2020 data from the Association of Theological Schools. Only 2 percent of seminary leaders have been in their roles for more than 20 years, while half have been in their roles for less than five years.

Mohler's longevity is "highly unusual," said Chris Meinzer, a senior director and chief operating officer for ATS.

Southern had 3,348 students in the fall of 2022, making it the second largest in the country, according to ATS, after Liberty University's John W. Rawlings School of Divinity.

In the mid-1990s, things were not so rosy. Mohler had been one of the lieutenants of the so-called Conservative Resurgence, a theological and political revolt in the SBC that wrested control of the denomination from its formerly moderate leadership.

That included installing conservative leaders in the SBC's institutions, including Southern Seminary, which before Mohler's tenure had championed women pastors and allowed space for professors to question

some conservative interpretations of Scripture.

Changed his mind on women in ministry

As a student in the 1980s, Mohler supported women pastors, and in 1984, he and other students placed a full-page ad in the local newspaper claiming that God was “an equal opportunity employer.”

But a meeting with legendary *Christianity Today* editor Carl Henry led Mohler to change his mind, he later recalled. At that meeting, Henry told Mohler that he’d regret his support for women in ministry, which sent Mohler off to the seminary library to research the issues.

“I ended up staying up until I could figure this out,” he said during a 2010 chapel service. “Somewhere between Carl Henry saying what he said to me and the dawn of the next day, my position had completely changed.”

But his change of heart toward women pastors cost him students. Three years after he became president, attendance had dropped by some 700 students and took nearly a decade to recover.

Mohler said when he took office, he expected pushback. The school, he said, had strayed from its theological foundations and was out of touch with what most Southern Baptists believed.

“We are talking about the reorientation of an institution that was already, you know, more than 100 years old,” he said. “It was not a small course correction.”

Continually narrowing room for differences



Bill Leonard was founding dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity.

If Southern has regained its momentum under Mohler, the politics have not necessarily gotten easier. Historian Bill Leonard, the founding dean of Wake Forest Divinity School and a former professor at Southern, said that the conservative takeover narrowed the room for differing opinions in the denomination. Then, once the more moderate Southern Baptists left, the conservatives turned on each other.

“There may come a time when there are only two Southern Baptists left, and each will think the other one is a liberal,” Leonard said.

Making Leonard’s point, Mohler played a role in the high-profile departure of Warren this summer and, two years ago, in the exit of the prominent Bible study teacher Beth Moore, who dissented from the SBC’s support of Trump.

Yet Mohler has come under fire himself in recent years from the denomination’s extreme right, whose members claim Southern promotes

“woke ideology” by talking about issues of race.

Leonard, who has known Mohler since the 1980s, when the future seminary president was his student, said Mohler’s conversion to the conservative viewpoint was genuine, but it was also a pragmatic decision.

“When he got nominated for the presidency, it appears he decided which way the wind was blowing for him,” Leonard said.

But the real key to Mohler is his personal ethical streak, Leonard said, which has made him equal parts a reformer and a company man.

“He’s not a flamethrower,” Leonard said. “He believes in institutions.”

Leonard said Mohler’s personal ethics have helped him to persevere when many other Southern Baptist leaders have fallen in recent years.

An unapologetic institutionalist

During a recent interview, Mohler agreed with that assessment, saying he was an unapologetic institutionalist. As if to illustrate the point, he said while he and Leonard have very different understandings of what it means to be a Baptist and even of how to interpret the Bible, he called his former professor one of the “best classroom teachers” he ever met.

“I still respect and appreciate those who taught me, even when we disagree,” he said.

Mohler also paid tribute to his predecessors, including McCall and Roy Honeycutt, whom he succeeded. Honeycutt, he said, disapproved of the direction Mohler planned to take the seminary, but he was gracious to Mohler during the handover.

“He was unfailingly a man of character and graciousness, and I am thankful

for that," Mohler said.

Despite his longevity, Mohler said he knows both the denomination and the seminary face challenges as organized religion declines and institutions fall out of favor.

"It's a humbling moment for the Southern Baptist Convention and for evangelicalism," he said. "A denomination that found an awful lot of confidence in constantly growing is now going to have to explain what faithfulness looks like when we are not."

Mohler said he has no plans to retire in the short term.

"I want to continue to be useful to the kingdom and to this institution," he said. "And I want to be at some point a cheerleader for whoever follows me."