

COVID-19 hampers seminary education in prisons

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ROSHARON (BP)—The 165 students earning bachelor's degrees in biblical studies at Darrington Prison Unit in South Texas no longer can attend classes, with the prison on lockdown since the presence of COVID-19 was confirmed in the facility.

But the interruption is itself a learning experience for the men, who are being trained to minister while serving time at prisons across Texas.

“It is part of God’s equipping and his sovereignty for what these men need in their hearts,” said Brenna Norwood, director of programs for the Heart of Texas Foundation, which runs the prison education program in partnership with Scarborough College of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. “This is an interruption that (God) knew was coming, and he’s strengthening them. He’s growing them through this, preparing them for ministry in the midst of this.”

Two cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed at Darrington, a maximum-security facility with a population of about 2,000 men; 150 were being monitored after possible exposure to the coronavirus, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported April 14 on its website.

Prison seminary programs affected by pandemic

The Scarborough College Darrington Prison Extension program is among similar prison education programs offered by Southern Baptist seminaries

in six states. All of the programs have been altered in some way by the pandemic.

Along with the program at Darrington, programs offered in North Carolina by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Louisiana by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary continue. Programs offered by New Orleans Seminary in prisons in Florida, Georgia and Mississippi have been suspended during the pandemic.

At Nash Correctional Institution in Nashville, N.C., the 66 men enrolled in Southeastern Seminary's program have been able to continue their full academic load. Each class is divided among three separate rooms with no more than eight students per room. Desks are situated at least six feet apart, and instruction is conducted online through Zoom utilizing a large television screen, according to Seth Bible, director of prison programs for Southeastern Seminary.

"It allows me to log in from my house and project to all three classrooms simultaneously, so I only have to do one lecture," Bible said.

Instructional opportunities in prison vary by state.

Limited opportunities in Louisiana

New Orleans Seminary is allowed to continue only a limited number of classes at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, La., and the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel, La.



Inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola were the first to have the opportunity to pursue seminary training through a

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary extension at the nation's largest maximum security prison. Inmate Paul Will, pastor of Grace Baptist Church of the Main Camp, is a 2007 graduate of seminary's extension program at Angola. (Baptist Press file image from "A New Hope," a documentary about the ministry)

Kevin Brown, director of the seminary's Prison Extension Center education, said chaplains with New Orleans Seminary doctorate degrees who are considered essential prison personnel are teaching some classes, and some students are completing assignments independently.

All other prison seminary classes have been suspended, including programs at Hardee Correctional Institution for men in Bowling Green, Fla.; the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, and the Whitworth Women's Facility in Hartwell, Ga.

"We're doing what we can do to keep moving, to keep the students advancing," Brown said. "But this COVID thing, it's more serious in prison than it is for you and I, because once it gets in the prison it's not getting out. I mean, the prisoners can't go anywhere."

At least one Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections employee at Angola has died of COVID-19, the agency announced April 10. Prisoners who tested positive for COVID-19 but were asymptomatic were being isolated in Camp J of the prison compound. Normally, many prisoners at the facility live in open dormitories.

A Mississippi inmate with another illness was found to have also had

COVID-19 after his death at Parchman, the Associated Press reported April 14.

Internet access is not allowed in the prisons served by New Orleans Seminary, which prevents instruction via Zoom and other online platforms.

“We have the capabilities,” Brown said. “We haven’t figured out how to create sufficient firewalls to be able to teach into the prison.”

Brown said New Orleans Seminary has ordered the necessary equipment as authorities at Angola have considered allowing an exception, but approval hasn’t been given.

“The scary thing for them is, that if prisoners have access to the internet, they’ve got access to all the negative stuff on the internet as well,” Brown said.

New Orleans Seminary has nearly 150 students enrolled in the five states, according to Brown, who added that graduation will be delayed for some because of the pandemic, but the setback is temporary. New Orleans Seminary was the first Southern Baptist seminary to offer education in prison, beginning the program in 1995. The program has expanded to include two master’s degree opportunities, including the Master of Divinity with classes in biblical Hebrew and Greek.

“At Angola, it’s the gold standard,” Brown said. “Our guys have proven themselves to be amazing mentors and leaders, and have a degree of trust with administration that they don’t have in our other prisons.”

Texas classes suspended

At the Heart of Texas Foundation program, classes are suspended but students had completed enough course work before the pandemic to graduate this spring, Norwood said. For the first time in the program’s 10-

year history, though, a chapel service will not be held for graduation.

Grove Norwood, Brenna's husband and the Heart of Texas Foundation founder and CEO, said the students have been diligent in completing coursework despite the obstacles presented by the pandemic.

"They do work very, very hard in seminary," Grove Norwood said. "This is no piece of cake. ... The field ministers themselves are still the light in the darkest of places. Whether they're talking across the hall to the cell next door, or to the bunk next door, their light is still shining."

Men accepted into the Scarborough bachelor's degree program are all transferred to Darrington Prison, a maximum-security unit near Rosharon, for more than four years of coursework, and then trained in the foundation's field ministry program. Upon completion, they are transferred to their previous prison units to serve as ministers to fellow prisoners.

Southeastern Seminary plans to graduate its first class of seminary students in North Carolina prisons in 2021, with 26 students currently on course to graduate, and then to minister to others as they complete their prison terms.

Bible said seminary education is important to the rehabilitation of those who are incarcerated, and called it an important investment in the lives of those serving lengthy or lifetime sentences.

"We've seen the impact that it's had at Angola in Louisiana, and also the impact that a similar program has had on the state of Texas through Southwestern Seminary," Bible said.

"We believe that some of the most influential people inside of the prisons are actually those long-term folks, and so we see a real value in investing in them so that they can make a positive impact from the inside."