

Seminary started by Baptist moderates to close in January

The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond opened in the wake of the Southern Baptist “conservative resurgence” launched in 1979.

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [January 2, 2019](#) issue

The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond—the first freestanding seminary started as an alternative to the six Southern Baptist Convention seminaries—is closing its doors “due to financial pressures.”

One of 15 theological institutions that receives funding from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the seminary opened for classes in the fall of 1991. Plans for the school arose after the president and dean at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, resigned in 1987 rather than implement restrictive hiring policies of the board of trustees.

Southeastern was the first SBC institution to feel the full effect of the “conservative resurgence” launched in 1979 to reverse trends that the movement’s leaders warned would eventually lead the nation’s largest Protestant body to join the ranks of declining mainline denominations they perceived as departing from the fundamentals of Christianity.

BTSR opened with a mission statement declaring itself “unmistakably Baptist” but with a commitment to being “racially and gender inclusive with an ecumenical commitment and a global perspective.” Three decades later, 750 graduates serve as pastors, chaplains, missionaries, and nonprofit leaders round the world.

“The first word is thanksgiving for a life well lived for almost 30 years,” said President Linda McKinnish Bridges, a member of the founding faculty in 1991, in announcing the closure at a meeting in November.

With the announcement, BTSR joins a number of theology schools that have closed or cut back during the last two decades as seminaries compete for a shrinking pool of prospective students.

Andover-Newton Theological School, affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA and the United Church of Christ and founded in 1807, sold its campus outside Boston in 2017 and formally affiliated with Yale Divinity School in Connecticut.

Episcopal Divinity School stopped granting degrees in June 2017 and affiliated with Union Theological Seminary in New York City, laying off the entire faculty.

BTSR has survived past budget challenges. In 2008 the school eliminated four of its 13 full-time faculty in a cost-cutting move. In 2011 trustees voted to sell the campus purchased in 1996, and in 2013 the seminary relocated to a more affordable site.

[Board chair Bill Wilson [said in a statement](#) that “as our attorney has helped us delve more deeply into our financial situation, we have come to realize that the board has inherited a financial crisis that has been building over many years. Our cash flow is not adequate to continue to cover expenses, we have only one asset left to liquidate, and we are not in a position to borrow additional funds. The issues have grown so profound that we have not found a way to navigate through them.”

The school will not have a spring term and instead will cease to offer courses when a three-week term this month is complete. The school is raising funds for severance for full-time faculty and staff members, with three donors offering \$160,000 in matching gifts, according to the trustees’ statement.]

BTSR’s two partners in the Richmond Theological Consortium—Union Presbyterian Seminary and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University—stepped up by offering to help students transfer a maximum number of courses. Trustees are also putting plans in place to address the needs of faculty and staff.

The move affects 55 students who will have to finish their degrees elsewhere, four full-time faculty, and three full-time and four part-time staff, according to Beth McMahon, director of communications. Nine students are on track to graduate in 2019.

BTSR trustees initiated formation of a new Center for Faith, Justice, and Reconciliation, a “resource and convening center” focused on racial justice and innovation in the church. While the center will not grant degrees, Bridges said, “it will carry forward the vision fully formed in 1991 that animated the beginnings of BTSR.”

Corey Walker, dean of Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, said his school and BTSR were both “born in oppression.” Established by northern Baptists to aid newly freed slaves following the Civil War, Virginia Union University did not have its first African American president until 1940.

Bridges said, “We all must admit to one another in our vulnerability at this moment there is a host of things to be grateful for and to arch our vision to what God can do through BTSR.” —Baptist News Global

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Seminary started by Baptist moderates to close in June” and an update appears in the Following Up section.