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Staying on course: School of Religion continues to be rudder of the university

February 01, 2009 | Paul McLinden

The School of Religion officially took shape in 1977, when the late Dr. Jerry Falwell called his leaders together to restructure Liberty's curriculum. What had been a collection of majors and programs became actual schools, none more important than the SOR, which Falwell deemed the "rudder of the ship."

Dr. Sumner Wemp, known for his evangelistic work, was installed as the first dean of the SOR that year, and served until 1980. He was succeeded by Dr. Woodrow Kroll, who served until 1982. During that year the B.R. Lakin building was constructed, housing both the SOR and the Seminary, and Dr. Elmer Towns was appointed head of both schools. Towns, who is Liberty University's co-founder and vice president, continued as dean of the Seminary until 1994 and remains dean of the SOR. With a passion for research, teaching, writing books and working with pastors, Towns is also Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology.

The 80s era began with "some wild, good days," said Towns of the school's rapid growth. "We really put the pedal to the metal." But the late 80s brought some tough financial days. With the school's finances and resources strained, teachers took on more and larger classes without extra pay to keep the school going. However, the hardship fostered a healthy interaction that, by 1992, allowed the SOR and Seminary to each stand on their own.

From the beginning, the SOR has always taught the basic core courses of religion and Christianity, offering Evangelism 101, Old Testament and New Testament Survey, Theology and

Philosophy. Towns, noting that the curriculum mirrors that of Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Mo., where Falwell originally studied said, “I have always been convinced that Jerry Falwell thought rationally and systematically because of that strong training in systematic theology and he wanted the same thing for our students.”

The SOR offers degrees in Biblical Studies, Church Ministries, Inter-Cultural Studies, Pastoral Leadership & Philosophy — in residential and online formats.

Tim Yonts, a Biblical Studies major planning to graduate in May, can attest to the rigorous curriculum. “The professors don’t make it easy,” he said, but added that some of his most difficult classes have also been the most rewarding.

The university as a whole estimates that one in 10 – or 20,000 – of its graduates or former students are in some form of full-time Christian service. Many serve in the largest churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Youth Ministries graduate Ryan Hesseling is confident with his training. The youth program “really prepares you [with] not only the theories behind what you do, but actually what you are going to do ... so that when you go into a ministry, you’re not lost. It has both that spiritual application and the practical application.”

Tracking Liberty’s growth, one sees an interesting dynamic: students have been some of our best recruiters. Strong involvement with foreign missions through the Inter-Cultural Studies program has taken students around the world, sometimes as many as 12 trips per year, to places like Haiti, South America, Europe and the Far East. These teams provide support to churches in the areas of aviation, linguistic translation and church planting. But the students’ personal contact with the young people from these locations — staying in their homes, eating with the families — has drawn many foreign students to Liberty University.

“So, our early recruitment was not just Jerry on television, and not just mailings,” said Towns. “It was that personal touch of our students.”

Dr. Steve Vandegriff sees our students’ recruiting efforts even closer to home. As Executive Director of the Center for Youth Ministries and Professor of Youth Ministries, he oversees YouthQuest. This student-based ministry provides spiritual encouragement to the youth and youth leaders of churches through worship, drama and discipleship. “They’re not like a showy group that goes and does a show and then splits,” said Vandegriff. “When they go to a church, they are there the whole weekend; they stay in homes with the teenagers. They bring in a lot of students.”

The most recent and visible change to the SOR is its building. The 27-year-old structure, now known as the Elmer Towns Religion Hall, received an exterior facelift in the fall, and a new 900-seat lecture hall — named the Towns-Alumni Lecture Hall — opened in September.

But the “big, new thing” for the SOR, according to Towns, is the Women’s Ministry major, led by Dr. Monica Rose, which prepares women to be directors of women’s ministries in local

churches. The department has turned out more than 28 graduates in its first two years. Towns is fond of quoting Bill Bright of Campus Crusade, who said, “Liberty is the largest school training young people for ministry in the world ... and maybe in history.”