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Scrambling over policy

MILITARY BASES MAY HOUSE MIGRANTS; 20-DAY CHILD DETENTION CHALLENGED

South of the border. Thousands press on despite gang violence and White House policy of “zero tolerance” toward illegal immigrants. »17A

North of the border. First lady visits children at Texas detention center, while U.S. House rejects hard-right immigration bill. »18A

By Nomaan Merchant and Susan Montoya Bryan
The Associated Press

MCALLEN, TEXAS» The U.S. government wrestled with the ramifications Thursday of President Donald Trump’s move to stop separating families at the border, with no clear plan to reunite the more than 2,300 children already taken from their parents and Congress again failing to take action on immigration reform.

In a day of confusion and conflicting reports, the Trump administration began drawing up plans to house as many as 20,000 migrants on U.S. military bases. But officials gave differing accounts as to whether those beds would be for children or for entire families.

At the same time, the Justice Department went to court in an attempt to overturn a decades-old settlement that limits to 20 days the amount of time migrant children can be locked up with their families.

Democratic mayors and religious leaders, meanwhile, traveled to the border to increase pressure on the White House over its hardline immigration policies.

And in the Texas border city of McAllen, federal prosecutors unexpectedly did not pursue charges against 17 immigrants. A federal prosecutor said “there was no prosecution sought” in light of Trump’s executive order ending the practice of separating families.

FAMILIES » 18A

FEDERAL STUDY

Report raises new concerns on chemicals

By Bruce Finley
The Denver Post

SECURITY» Colorado residents worried by a federal health agency’s new proposed limits for perfluorinated chemicals and the detection of contaminated water west of Boulder are demanding that state officials do more to protect people.

A federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry study, which White House officials tried to suppress because of concerns about “a potential public relations nightmare,” proposes minimum risk levels of PFCs that may require water concentration limits tougher than the Environmental Protection Agency’s.

WATER » 12A

“It’s the perfect place for me because they care for people who are rejected and not accepted in society.”

Denver’s Iliff School of Theology graduate of the year Mina Nau



SCHOOL SPIRIT

Iliff theology campus using social justice to remain resilient

By Danika Worthington The Denver Post

At a time when theology schools and seminaries are downsizing, merging or closing, Denver’s Iliff School of Theology has been holding steady. ¶ The United Methodist-related school, which is tucked next to the University of Denver on South University Boulevard and East Iliff Avenue, is little known around the metro area but has garnered a national reputation as a progressive theology school that’s rooted in social justice causes. And that reputation might be what’s saving it.

Fewer students have been attending theological schools; enrollment dropped 9 percent in the U.S. and Canada from 2007 to 2017, when there were 72,896 students. That drop comes as Pew Research studies find that fewer Americans identify as religious, a change largely attributed to the growing number of millennials who aren’t members of any organized religion.

But despite the grim picture, the United Methodist seminary has been able to buck the downward trend, surviving in part because of its liberal theology instead of rigid doctrine that is more typical of many religious seminaries, administrators say.

“That is not Iliff’s future,” school president Tom Wolfe said of seminaries closing.

ILIFF » 8A



“If you talk to many of our students, they will say we bring social justice into our education and then train them to be better spiritual leaders.”

Boyung Lee,
Iliff School of
Theology dean

Photos by
Aaron Ontiveroz,
The Denver Post

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ILIFF

◀FROM 1A

“That is not even in our thinking. We are turning this exactly in the opposite direction.”

While Mina Nau pursued a career in fashion in Los Angeles, she stayed with a family friend whose son was in San Quentin State Prison.

She answered the phone once when he called. Nau could tell he needed advice, so she dropped a Bible verse. The two began writing and talking about faith. After the fifth letter, they began dating. They’ve been together for six years.

Nau’s boyfriend repeatedly urged her to study theology. He wasn’t the first to suggest it. Nau’s family is from Tonga, a Polynesian kingdom of South Pacific islands, and Christianity is one of the biggest tenets of Tongan culture. Eventually, Nau, 35, decided her boyfriend might be right.

“I really don’t know how I ended up (at Iliff) but I was spiritually led to be here and it totally makes sense,” said Nau. “It’s a social justice-oriented institution. It’s the perfect place for me because they care for people who are rejected and not accepted in society.”

Students seek social justice

Between 35 and 40 faiths are represented in the school’s roughly 300-person student body. Around 30 percent openly identify as LGBTQ.

The student body trends older as more people embark on second or third careers. Plenty of graduates are still going into parishes, including Nau, who will be heading to Hope United Methodist Church in Greenwood Village. But a growing number are entering nonprofits or creating non-traditional worship, such as holding services in parks or bars.

“If you talk to many of our students, they will say we bring social justice into our education and then train them to be better spiritual leaders who are equipped to lead these critical issues of our time,” Iliff faculty dean Boyung



George “Tink” Tinker, an Iliff professor and leader in the American Indian Movement, was watched closely by the Denver police because of his involvement in activism. *AAaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post*

Lee said.

She said too few traditional churches fight racism and homophobia. They’re also not talking about inter-religious relationships, science, gender equality or climate justice.

“To a lot of these young, intelligent, committed people, these are not exclusive things,” Lee said. “It’s part of who they are, it’s part of our life’s journey and it’s part of core elements of our daily life.”

Faculty of activists

In the early 2000s, the Denver Police Department kept files on more than 200 activist groups and more than 3,200 individuals. George “Tink” Tinker, an Iliff professor and leader in the American Indian Movement, had the third largest file.

The school had one, too.

But when the former president told faculty members they didn’t need to worry because the

school’s file also was filled with information about Tinker, many were disappointed. “You could see crestfallen faces around the table,” Tinker said.

Iliff has been rooted in progressivism since its founding in 1892, Wolfe said. (It helped that its founder was an avid astronomer who believed in evolution.) But in the 1980s, Iliff shifted from being progressive to putting social justice at the forefront.

The transition came when Tinker and Vincent Harding, a civil rights activist who wrote Martin Luther King Jr.’s Vietnam speech, were hired. Other faculty and alumni helped secure the school’s social justice reputation.

Former professor Charles Milligan was the chairman of the Colorado ACLU and started the Colorado Council to Abolish Capital Punishment. In 2006, the schools’ interim president J. Philip Wogaman wrote an op-ed giving a theo-

logical analysis in favor of gay marriage (Colorado voted to ban same-sex marriage that year). New York Times best-selling author Nadia Bolz-Weber founded the House for All Sinners & Saints, a local Lutheran church, while in seminary at Iliff.

Even so, the school has had some egregious missteps.

In the mid-1970s, the school displayed a book bound in the tanned skin of an American Indian. A Methodist minister gave the school the book in 1892. The school eventually worked with the American Indian Movement to dispose of the book and give the person a proper burial.

Iliff was the center of controversy again when its first Latino president David Maldonado was forced to resign in 2004. A United Methodist Church probe found institutional racism and white privilege played a role in his exit, and Iliff took steps to im-

prove its culture.

Tinker, who retired in April, said if he had the chance for a reset, he’d still work at Iliff.

“People still have issues to work on,” he said. “Unlike some schools, Iliff was willing to work on those issues”

Driving the conversation

When Boyung Lee was a student, she was stopped by South Korean police who rifled through her backpack, looking for banned books.

Her country was in turmoil. In 1979, President Park Chung-hee was assassinated by his security chief. The next year, a military coup extended martial law and banned political activities.

When Lee got to college, she was recruited by underground activists. At the time, secret police pretended to be university students to arrest activists. After a photo of Lee at a demonstration was sent to either her father or his supervisor, she took her activism behind the scenes.

Lee recalled her student activism while sitting in her Iliff office. She’s the first Asian woman to be the dean of a theological school (“I didn’t want to be another first but...,” she sighed).

When she searched for an administrative job, Lee knew she wasn’t looking for just any school. She wanted to work in a place where the school drives the discussion rather than react in crisis mode. She was hired in 2017.

Wolfe, Iliff’s president, said the school is trying to rethink theological education. That means finding new funding, trying new programs, such as one exploring Artificial Intelligence, and forging new partnerships, including the addition of a co-working space.

The new initiatives are driven by the bumpy state of higher education but Wolfe takes care to describe the school’s current state.

“It’s not that anything’s failing,” he said. “It’s that a lot of things are changing so institutions have got to change also.”

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