

Upon his departure from Southern, McSwain said he wanted to praise retiring seminary President Roy Honeycutt.

"There is no way I can express my appreciation to him for the chance to work with him closely, nor is there any way for me to communicate the depths of respect I have for his integrity and his skills in holding together Southern Seminary at what has to be one of its historically most critical moments," he said.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Mercer to consider
divinity school

By Greg Warner

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Mercer University may start its own divinity school if a study now underway proves the project feasible.

Mercer trustees agreed April 15 to conduct the study at the request of Baptist pastors in Georgia. Mercer President Kirby Godsey will appoint a committee which will bring a report to the trustees' next meeting in December.

The school joins several other Baptist colleges that either have started divinity schools or are considering such a move.

The request for a divinity school came from a group of Georgia pastors, represented by Ches Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church of Tifton.

"This is not something Mercer has pushed for," said Mercer spokesman Larry Brumley.

"We need to underscore the university is not going into this study with the preconceived notion that we will or won't start a divinity school," he added. "Mercer is not going to start another school unless the money is there."

The study will determine if there is a need for a divinity school, how much it would cost, and if the financial resources are available.

Although Mercer has an endowment of \$114 million, Brumley said money for a divinity school would have to come from new sources. If an endowment is started to fund the school, he said, there is a "general feeling" that about \$10 million in new endowment money would be required.

Mercer receives about \$2 million a year for scholarships from the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia, but Brumley said the state convention will not be asked to help pay for a divinity school.

Although most Southern Baptist ministers receive their graduate training in the six seminaries owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention, a trend toward independent or college-based clergy training has emerged in recent years.

Driving that trend is the 14-year theological-political controversy in the SBC, which has awarded control of the SBC seminaries to fundamental-conservatives. Critics say the seminaries' new leaders favor indoctrination over traditional theological training.

Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., and Gardner Webb College in Boiling Springs, N.C., already have opened divinity schools. Baylor University in Waco, Texas, plans to open the doors of George W. Truett Seminary in the fall of 1994. Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., has stated its intention to start a divinity school but has set no timetable.

In addition, two non-Baptist universities in the South -- Duke and Emory

-- have started Baptist studies programs as part of their own divinity schools.

One Baptist seminary unattached to a college already is functioning -- the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. The school was founded in 1989 by SBC moderates after fundamental-conservatives gained control of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Both the Richmond seminary and the Baylor effort receive funding from the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Whether or not Mercer would seek funding from the Fellowship would be determined in the feasibility study, Brumley said.

The study committee will include pastors and Mercer administrators, faculty and trustees.

A Mercer seminary would draw students from Georgia and neighboring states, Brumley said. He predicted the Richmond seminary, because of its distance from Georgia, would have "no bearing" on any Mercer effort.

If approved, the divinity school would be located either at Mercer's main campus in Macon or in Atlanta, where the university operates a graduate center for 1,600 students.

Financial problems forced Mercer to close its Atlanta-based school of arts and sciences in 1990. But Brumley said Mercer is in its best financial state in years and stands to improve that status soon when it sells some Atlanta property for an estimated \$25 million.

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Power of prayer largely ignored
by researchers, Gallup says

NEW YORK (ABP) -- One of the most powerful influences in America has been virtually ignored by social researchers, according to the country's best-known pollster.

That power is prayer, says George Gallup Jr., co-chairman of the Gallup Organization.

"Lives transformed by prayer can bring about a changed society," Gallup told a joint meeting of the Baptist Public Relations Association and the Religious Public Relations Council in New York April 17.

In fact, America's spirituality has more impact on society than other demographic factors, said Gallup, a Presbyterian. "It's the intensity of religion that really drives this country," he said.

Yet the influence of America's spirituality on society has gone largely unexamined, said Gallup, whose organization conducts 10,000 surveys a year.

"We know more about people's sex lives than we do their prayer lives," he said.

While researchers know that about a third of Americans claim to have had a religious experience, little is known about the nature of those experiences. "We know a lot about the breadth of the spiritual life in America, but we know very little about the depth."

Yet, Gallup said, researchers are becoming increasingly curious about the "inner life" of Americans. His own organization has conducted research on prayer and forgiveness and developed a scale to measure the depth of religious experience.

Gallup said he found that about 13 percent of Americans live the faith they profess. While church involvement makes little difference in behavior, he said, there is evidence "that deep and transforming faith can make a profound difference in people's lives."

In a new book called *Saints Among Us*, Gallup attempts to identify those people who exhibit "the characteristics of modern everyday saints."

In a question and answer session, Gallup said acknowledging spiritual power does not undercut his objectivity as a researcher. "To be intellectually honest, you have to allow for a transcendent God," he explained.

Gallup offered several suggestions to those who want to expand the influence of spirituality in America:

-- promote constitutionally permissible ways to bring religion into public schools;

-- develop a "healthy pluralism" that is confident in one's own faith but comfortable with religious differences;

-- promote small groups for sharing and nurture; and

-- elevate those people who are good faith examples.

While the outlook for America is "somewhat bleak," with growing social ills and an apparent decline in morals, Gallup said, "there is not a spiritual vacuum in our country but spiritual chaos."

Americans practice "a la carte religion," choosing from a wide variety of religious options. "People want the fruits of faith but not the obligations," he said.

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-- By Greg Warner

Religious activity protected
in public schools, says Walker

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Students may pray, read their Bibles and sing hymns in public schools, according to a Baptist church-state specialist.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the religion clauses in the First Amendment prevent the state from advancing or impeding religion, but they say nothing about private citizens.

"Students are generally free to exercise their religion according to the dictates of their conscience even while at school," he said.

Walker led a workshop on the relationship between religion and the public schools as part of the Children and the Church Conference April 21-23. The conference was sponsored by the Gheens Center for Christian Family Ministry at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"As a matter of individual free exercise, they may pray whenever and to whomever they like -- whether in the classroom, the lunch room or the playing field -- provided they don't interfere with the educational process or infringe on other students' rights to be left alone."

Walker told participants the Equal Access Act of 1984 allows religious groups to meet before and after school -- just like other non-curriculum groups. The act protects all student groups against discrimination on the basis of "religious, political, philosophical or other content of speech," he said.

If the Young Republicans can meet, so can the Young Baptists, he added.

While the nation's high court has ruled that public schools cannot indoctrinate, they can teach about religion, he said.

"Religion should be taught within its natural historical, cultural and pedagogical context," Walker said. "Courses in art, music, literature and history will offer opportunities to include discussion about religious influences."

Walker pointed to guidelines, produced by the Public Education Religious

Studies Center at Wright State University, that differentiate between permissible teaching about religion and unlawful indoctrination. The school may:

- approach religion from an academic viewpoint but not a devotional one;
- strive for student awareness of religion but should not press for acceptance of any one religion;
- sponsor study about religion but may not sponsor the practice of religion;
- expose students to a diversity of religious views but may not impose any particular view;
- educate about all religions but may not promote or denigrate any religion;
- inform the student about various beliefs but should not seek to force conformity to any particular belief.

The Supreme Court has not ruled on the permissibility of observing religious holidays in public schools; however, it did let stand a lower-court decision upholding the constitutionality of a school district's guidelines.

Those guidelines allow several holidays that have a "religious and secular basis" to be observed, Walker said. The guidelines also permit historical and contemporary values and the origin of the religious holidays to be taught in an objective manner.

Religious symbols may be used as teaching aids. Music, art and literature with religious themes are permissible if presented in a "prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday," the guidelines say.

The school calendar should be arranged to minimize conflicts with religious holidays, he added.

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-- By Pam Parry

Listen to your life
is Buechner's advice

By Lacy Thompson

HOBE SOUND, Fla. (ABP) One would think that anyone who has written 27 books has a lot of things to say. Frederick Buechner has written 27 books, taught, lectured and preached for years. But he really has only one thing to say: "Pay attention."

"If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher," Buechner writes, "it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness, touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

"Pay attention to what happens to you," the 66-year-old Presbyterian minister/author added in a recent interview with the Louisiana Baptist Message.

"Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open to people. Listen to them when they speak and listen to them when they don't speak. Listen to yourself, the innermost truth of yourself. Pay attention to events and things. Where are events trying to lead us?"

And what is God saying in all this?

"I would beware very much of trying to capsulize it in some easy way," Buechner says. "But he's at us. Ultimately, what he is in our lives to do is to save us, to lead us back to himself and to each other as brothers and sisters. That would be the bedrock reality of what I think God is trying to do. But what form that takes in your life and mine has so much to do with the particularities of our lives."

Listen for "holy" moments, Buechner advises, for what he calls "whispers from the wings."

Buechner's non-fiction books -- including *Wishful Thinking*, *A Room Called Remember*, *Whistling in the Dark*, *The Clown in the Belfry* -- are full of holy moments he has experienced. And his works of fiction -- *The Book of Bebb*, *Godric*, *The Wizard's Tide* among others -- are full of glimpses at the sometimes hidden side of events, happenings too often passed by without enough thought.

"I think an awful lot of people, certainly including myself, go through life on automatic pilot, where you pay very little attention to where you are or what you are actually doing," Buechner says.

"You're thinking about what you have to do next. You're worrying about the future. You're playing over old recordings out of the past about things you did yesterday or wished you had done or something like that. It's an internal dialogue which makes it very hard to focus on what is really going on around us."

Unfortunately, Buechner says, many people allow the everydayness of life to prevent them from focusing on what goes on around them -- "the clouds in the sky, the child playing hula hoop on the sidewalk, the sound of the rain on the windshield of the car." In so doing, they run the risk of missing the voice of God, he suggests.

"God speaks to us graciously, undeservedly as far as we are concerned. But then we always have the freedom to listen or not to listen, to pay attention or not to pay attention."

No one can make every moment a key moment, Buechner concedes, but most people can take the matter more seriously than they do. And busy-ness is not an excuse Buechner accepts.

"Think of all the stupid things we do in our lives, dumb things like turning on the television set and so on. Why not take five minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes a day just to listen, to be aware of where you are and what's going on and what happened this morning and what so-and-so said?"

Buechner's own writings have the ability to transform the familiar. One can read a passage from Buechner and set it aside -- but not really. It lingers around the rest of the day. After listening to Buechner, some words are never the same.

-- "Lust is the craving for salt of a man who is dying of thirst," he writes.

-- "To sacrifice something is to make it holy by giving it away."

-- "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith."

-- "We've got to love one another and Jesus or die guessing," says a character in a Buechner novel.

And so it goes.

Ask Buechner about faith and he speaks of an ever-changing journey.

"Faith is not something you acquire the way you acquire a car or inherit a fortune or have your face lifted -- that once it's done, it's done. It's something that is stronger sometimes than other times. It's always in response to what's going on in your life."

Ask Buechner about grace and he talks of life itself being a gift, full of possibilities for renewal and salvation that are God's offerings to us.

"In my own experiences, even in the worst things that happened to me, there was always -- even though it may have taken me awhile to see it -- a

possibility for renewal and healing and hope buried somewhere, if not in the things themselves, at least in the peripheral, the aftermath and the consequences of those things. And that is by grace."

Ask Buechner about miracles and he is likely to tell of experiences from his own life, like the time he pulled off the road in despair, seeking a word from God, and a car drove by with a personalized license plate that read simply "TRUST."

"The trouble is we are so jaded and so skeptical and so scientific and logical in our late-20th-century mode that we are just not open, by and large, to miracles as even a possibility. We long since have discounted that dimension of things. Therefore, it is very hard for us to see it when it happens. But I do think many more things of that nature happen than any of us are aware of."

By living only at the surface of life, Buechner suggests, people fail to be what they are meant to be as humans. To be human, he says, is to be like Jesus. It's not easy but it's not hopeless either.

"Jesus says, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and thy neighbor as thyself.' That's the way you do it. You follow that as best you can. Fortunately, it's not left altogether for us to do or that would not be a gospel -- a Good News -- but really a terrible news, because we are all so bad at it. ...

"We become like Jesus by wanting to, by moving in that direction, by trying as best we can to love but helped in those endeavors by the sort of elusive but powerful presence in our lives of a God who is beckoning us that way and opening doors that lead in that direction."

Being human is closely related to being the church, Buechner says. The essence of church, he says, is people coming together to share who they are with one another and to admit they can't live fully human lives without each other and without God.

For Buechner, prayer is a way of listening to your life and to God.

"To pray is to speak to God and to listen for what God is saying. In other words, I don't think prayer is restricted to what we do at a moment when we could easily be said to be praying. I think a day or just an hour of keeping your eyes and ears open to what's going on around you is a kind of prayer. It's a listening prayer."

It is a form of prayer, he said, to take the time to look back on a day as one would look back on the television news of that day. "Listen in sort of an organized fashion to what happened to you that day.

"You can almost think of it in terms of the literal nationwide news of the day -- the search for peace, war, hunger, homelessness. They are the great issues in the newspaper. They are also the great issues in our lives. We're also searching for peace. We're also hungry. We're also homeless in the sense -- even if we have several homes -- of not feeling at home, at peace, in any of them. We're also at war, if only with ourselves.

"In what sense did those issues come up today and with what results? Think back upon the day. That also is a kind of prayer."

Listening also becomes a way to grow.

"You want to grow spiritually? You want to come to know God better? Just be open to the possibility of his coming into your life in new and unexpected ways. Stay alive. Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Keep your heart open. Maybe you don't have to do it at all. Maybe God will do it."