
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

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June 30, 1994

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
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**Mercer approves plans
for school of theology**

By Greg Warner

MACON, Ga. (ABP) – Mercer University plans to open its own school of theology, probably in Atlanta, as early as 1996.

The university's trustees approved detailed plans for the school in a special called meeting June 28. But the school won't open until the university raises a minimum of \$5 million for endowment and \$600,000 a year to cover operating costs.

To date \$1.3 million has been donated or pledged. No funds earmarked for current academic programs will be used, said Mercer President Kirby Godsey.

Plans call for Mercer to enroll 150 theology students and to employ five-to-seven faculty members. The school would offer a master of divinity degree and focus on preparing students for ministry in local churches.

Mercer, a Baptist school based in Macon, Ga., would join a growing number of Baptist-affiliated colleges to offer graduate theological training for ministers, including Baylor University in Waco, Texas, Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., and Gardner Webb College in Boiling Springs, N.C. Likewise, Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., has plans to open a divinity school.

The trend toward college-based theological training comes at a time when the six Southern Baptist Convention seminaries, the primary training ground for Southern Baptist ministers for most of this century, have taken a decided turn to the right. Conservatives who have controlled SBC affairs for more than a decade have instituted conservative reforms at the six seminaries, raising fears among SBC moderates that the schools will abandon education for indoctrination.

Southern Baptist moderates already have started one new seminary, the Baptist Theological

Seminary at Richmond, in reaction to the conservative trend. The three-year-old seminary has 107 students.

But theological upheaval in the SBC and its seminaries is not the primary motivation behind a Mercer school of theology, Godsey said.

"Mercer would not undertake this program as a kind of reaction or political move," he said. "It had more to do with doing theological training in a distinctively Mercer fashion than with what was going on in Baptist politics."

Still, Godsey concedes, the school could benefit from the SBC fallout. "In our feasibility study," he said, "it became clear that students were open to pursuing and looking at other institutions" besides SBC seminaries to get their theological training.

The trend toward college-based ministerial training is not new for Baptists. Many Baptist colleges were founded to provide theological training, including Mercer.

"At its founding, Mercer University was established for the purpose of preparing persons for the ministry," said Godsey, noting namesake Jesse Mercer left his \$40,000 estate to the school to fund theological education.

"Consequently, this decision today to proceed with plans to establish a school of theology strengthens the purpose for which Mercer University was established more than 160 years ago," Godsey said.

Impetus for the school came from "friends, alumni and other constituents of the university," Godsey said. The plans were the product of a yearlong feasibility study conducted by a 22-member committee made up of faculty, staff, trustees, alumni and pastors.

A key issue for the proposed school will be location. Trustees who approved the preliminary plans stated a "non-binding preference" for an Atlanta site.

Most of Mercer's academic programs are conducted in Macon, but the university maintains several graduate programs in Atlanta 90 miles north. Atlanta is a costlier location, primarily because adequate facilities are not available there.

In addition to the \$5 million minimum endowment, trustees said an additional \$3 million will be needed to construct or renovate Atlanta facilities and expand the library. Only \$750,000 would be needed for capital improvements if the school is located in Macon.

One supporter of the Atlanta location said the additional cost will not be an obstacle.

The \$8 million goal is "very achievable," said Truett Gannon, a Mercer alum and pastor of Smokerise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, an Atlanta suburb. "I believe we will have it in plenty of time to start in 1996."

Peter Rhea Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur, another Atlanta suburb, said he was excited about the school's decision but also "realistic" about the challenge of raising the money. "I think it's achievable, but that's not to say it's an easy task," he said.

Jones was part of a group that approached Mercer more than a year ago about starting a school of theology. He also served on the committee that studied the feasibility of the idea. He lobbied for an Atlanta location, he said, but others on the committee preferred Macon.

Atlanta is better, Gannon and Jones agreed, because it is a center for business and transportation and is within easy reach of most Baptists in the South. The abundance of Baptist churches in the Atlanta area will provide a training ground for ministers, Jones added, and help strike a balance between academic excellence and practical ministry.

Trustees June 28 approved hiring a development officer immediately, with a dean and admissions director to be added in the fall of 1995. The target date for opening will depend on how quickly money can be raised, Godsey said, but the school "should aim to enroll students in

September 1996."

Mercer may seek funding from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of moderate Southern Baptists that already funds the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and the Truett Seminary at Baylor, scheduled to open this fall.

The Fellowship's theological education ministry group said last September that it would "look favorably" on a request from Mercer for funding for a theology school, said Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman.

Although the Fellowship already supports theological schools in Virginia and Texas, it is important to have another one in the Atlanta area, Sherman said. "Our schools cannot but have the character of the soil in which they grow," Sherman said. While Baptists in Virginia and Texas are "a marvelous breed of people," he said, each is different from Georgia Baptists.

The Mercer decision "bodes well" for the Fellowship, Sherman said, because "the people who are the products of this school will be people with Baptist principles, and people with Baptist principles will be the kinds of people who will consider the Fellowship as a way to do missions."

Despite the proliferation of options for theological training, Sherman predicted there will be enough students to sustain the new institutions. He said the number of Baptist students enrolling at non-Baptist schools has increased -- including about 90 each at Duke and Emory universities -- as SBC seminaries have become more conservative.

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'Epidemic' of gun violence lacking
government attention, speakers say

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Although the "epidemic" of gun violence in America is claiming far more lives than previous health crises, the government is spending far less to combat it, according to speakers at a gun-violence conference.

While the government in 1952 spent \$200 million to combat polio, which claimed 3,145 lives that year, only a fraction of that amount -- \$2.4 million -- was spent in 1991 to prevent gun violence, which claimed 5,358 lives in the 15-19 age group alone, noted Robert Tanz of Children's Memorial Medical Center in Chicago.

"Guns are our polio," said Tanz, one of several speakers at the first National Conference on Gun Violence in Washington.

Public-opinion analyst Louis Harris stressed that "kids killing kids with guns is an epidemic." Other speakers agreed America should respond to gun violence with the same tenacity and priority given past health crises.

"It is adults' responsibility to make environments safe so kids can be kids," said Tanz. But he and other medical professionals expressed a feeling that they are "fighting a losing battle."

The June 23-25 conference, sponsored by the American Bar Association, brought together 27 national organizations to develop strategies for combating gun violence in America. Speakers came from the fields of politics, medicine, public service and law enforcement.

One panel of experts addressed the prevalence, causes and consequences of the gun problem in America. Robert Phillips, deputy medical director of the American Psychiatric

Association, said that violence on television and in music are desensitizing Americans. Arthur Kellerman, Injury Control Center director, proposed a reduction in the flow of weapons to high-risk individuals.

"Attempting to regulate guns once people have them is like trying to control malaria by telling mosquitoes not to bite," Kellerman said. "It's natural to want to protect yourself and your family with a firearm. It's also natural to seek shelter under a tree during a thunderstorm, but it's not a good idea."

Kent Amos, president and founder of the Urban Family Institute, discouraged guns in the home because they put children at risk.

Children are the most affected by repeated exposure to violence in the media because they mimic what they see, Phillips said.

Another panel discussed the most prevalent questions about children and guns. Sherman Spears, a gun-injury survivor and coordinator of Teens on Target, said that children's access to guns is the biggest contributor to violence among young people.

"Why is it that I can walk anywhere in my community to get guns, drugs or alcohol, but I must take a bus to get school supplies?" Spears asked.

Ruben Chavez, director of a gang-intervention program, explained why gangs are such a welcome environment for young people. "Gangs provide a sense of family. If families don't provide the support they need, kids will turn to gangs."

Spears and Chavez offered several solutions to the problem: educating parents and the media to be positive examples for young people, reducing the number of guns being sold, and encouraging youth to think of the long-range consequences of their actions.

New York is exploring one possible solution. Some city schools are staying open longer to provide safe zones for children. Alfonso Wyatt, vice president of the fund for the City of New York, said that he favors these "beacon schools" because they offer alternatives to violence.

William Schwab, a surgeon at a Philadelphia trauma center, he said, "Many of [the centers] are closing down from the financial burdens of treating gunshot wounds." Often no reimbursements are made for surgeries performed on gunshot victims, he said.

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— By Elizabeth Rivers

Landmark civil-rights law
celebrates 30th anniversary

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) — Thirty years after the nation's most sweeping civil-rights measure was signed into law, equality and justice for all have made significant strides but they are far from a reality, according to a Baptist veteran of the civil-rights movement.

Foy Valentine, former executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, which helped push for the legislation, said "tremendous progress has been made in recent decades" in civil rights.

Looking at where America was before the Civil War, in 1896 when the nation's high court handed down the "separate but equal" decision, and in 1954 when the same court ordered

the desegregation of public schools, one can see that the Civil Rights Act can be seen as the "most sweeping general legislation this country ever had with regards to race," Valentine said.

The 30-year anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is July 2. Then-president Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, providing for non-discrimination in public accommodations, voting rights, desegregation of public facilities and equal employment opportunities.

Valentine, who characterized the CLC's role in the 1960s as a "catalyst" in the civil-rights movement, said the country has continued to make "great progress," but it is clear that many "genuine ideas of our founding forebears" have yet to be realized.

"It's like the human situation in general; it is a never-ending challenge to bring forth justice."

Just a few months before Johnson signed the bill, he spoke about the legislation to 175 Southern Baptists who were attending a CLC-sponsored seminar on Christian citizenship in Washington. Speaking in the Rose Garden, Johnson challenged Southern Baptists to be as prophetic on civil rights as they had been on religious liberty.

"Baptists have been prophets, your forebears have suffered as few others have suffered, and their suffering was not in vain," said Johnson, whose great-grandfather was editor of the first Baptist newspaper in Texas and the second president at Baylor University.

While Johnson's legacy includes the landmark legislation, the push for the measure began several years earlier and was promoted by President John Kennedy before his assassination in 1963.

In that same year, Kennedy challenged the nation and its Congress with a powerful civil-rights message.

"Let it be clear in our own hearts and minds," Kennedy said, "that it is not merely because of the Cold War, and not merely because of the economic waste of discrimination, that we are committed to achieving true equality of opportunity. The basic reason is because it is right."

Kennedy added, "This is an effort in which every individual who asks what he can do for his country should be able and willing to take part."

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Supreme Court rejects
First Amendment cases

WASHINGTON (ABP) – On the same day it decided the most significant church-state case of the 1993-94 term, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review three other disputes raising First Amendment questions.

Without comment, the high court refused June 27 to review lower-court rulings that:

- upheld a Des Plaines, Ill., zoning law that permits churches to operate day-care centers in residential zones without obtaining special-use permits;
- refused to exempt an Oklahoma Baptist church's boarding academy from state licensing requirements; and
- dismissed a Louisiana man's objection to including the words "so help me God" in the state bar admission ceremony.

That same day, the high court struck down New York's creation of a public school district to provide special education for a Hasidic Jewish community. The court said the special district crossed the line from permissible accommodation to impermissible establishment of religion.

The Des Plaines zoning ordinance left standing was challenged by a day-care operator who was denied a special-use permit and contended that the ordinance's treatment of churches violated the First Amendment's ban on governmental establishment of religion.

Applying a three-part legal standard known as the Lemon test, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the law. Under Lemon, the ordinance had to have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

The appeals court said the ordinance served the secular purpose of minimizing governmental meddling in religious affairs and is permissible as long as the church-run day-care centers are non-profit operations.

In the Oklahoma case, Calvary Baptist Church in Pittsburg County had sought to have its Christian boarding academy exempted from state licensing requirements. A lower court sided with the church, but a state appeals court said a state law that exempts part-time and day-care facilities operated for educational purposes does not apply to full-time boarding facilities. The church appealed to the nation's high court after the Oklahoma Supreme Court refused to review the appeals-court decision.

In the Louisiana case, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed the challenge to the religious oath as moot because the plaintiff had been admitted to the bar.

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- By Larry Chesser

Judge allows school prayer
initiative to remain on ballot

WASHINGTON (ABP) – District of Columbia voters may have the opportunity to decide whether or not to allow prayer at public school functions following a June 29 decision by a D.C. Superior Court judge.

Judge Jose Lopez ruled that an initiative headed for the D.C. ballot should be left to the voters rather than dismissed by the court. However, school prayer supporters still do not have enough signatures required to get the initiative on the November ballot.

The initiative, challenged by People for the American Way and the American Civil Liberties Union, would permit non-sectarian, non-proselytizing, student-led prayer. The plaintiffs contended that the proposed school-prayer initiative should not be on the ballot because it is unconstitutional and would violate the D.C. Human Rights Act. The plaintiffs pointed to Supreme Court precedent that ruled as unconstitutional prayers at public school functions, such as graduation.

The judge said that "pre-trial review of a proposed initiative is clearly an intrusion on the legislative process. And the sense of judicial meddling must feel greater when the intrusion is on the right of the people to decide.

"In exercising its discretion the court must be mindful of not interfering with the legislative

process."

One church-state specialist observed that this ruling does not prevent a constitutional challenge later on. Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the standard for keeping an initiative off the ballot is more rigorous than the standard used to decide the ban's constitutionality after passage.

"The initiative if adopted in its present form is clearly unconstitutional under Supreme Court precedent," he added.

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- By Pam Parry

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