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Virginia seminary gets grant to pioneer distance learning

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- A Baptist seminary in Virginia has received a grant of more than \$800,000 to pioneer the use of new technology to make theological education more accessible to the local church.

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond received the grant of \$806,821 from the Lilly Endowment to develop a program of distance education that will use high-tech tools to offer unprecedented access to theological education for churches and pastors throughout the region.

"What we are doing is creating a new model, remaking theological education for the future of the church," said Tom Graves, president of the Richmond seminary.

In the past, time, distance and expense have limited ministers' access to traditional seminary education or to continuing-education opportunities. The new B TSR program will address those problems by offering full seminary courses in a variety of locations, taught in person, through teleconferencing and via the Internet.

The distance-learning program will be targeted particularly to pastors who have not had opportunity to receive theological education and to ministers seeking continuing education.

"This really is a whole new way of thinking," Graves said. "In the past, theological education has been one step removed from the church. Persons called to ministry were sent off to seminary, and later they came back to lead the church. But now, distance-learning technology will allow us to bring the classroom to the church with an immediacy that has never been possible before."

The new approach is significant because "you can't do Information Age teaching with Industrial Age approaches," added Bob Dale, director of Virginia Baptists' Center for Creative Church Leadership Development.

"As an educator in the Industrial Age, you warehoused information, gave people facts and didn't try to relate those facts [to one another or a larger context]," Dale said. "But the Information Age is an interactive world. To make meaning for people, information has to be put into an interactive context."

Joining the seminary in the venture will be Averett College, a Baptist-affiliated school in Danville, Va., and the Center for Creative Church Leadership Development, which is operated by the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Bluefield College, a Baptist school in Bluefield, Va., also may participate.

Also working with BTSR will be Chowan College, a school in Murfreesboro, N.C., affiliated with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. The college is in the northeast corner of the state near the Virginia border and serves a number of pre-ministerial students. It recently established a Center for Christian Growth and Development.

BTSR's Virginia Baptist partners will bring unique contributions to the project. Averett College has an extensive distance-learning program already in place, offering both bachelor's-level instruction and an MBA at 37 approved sites across the state. The Center for Creative Church Leadership Development provides a full program of basic and continuing education for clergy and local church leaders throughout Virginia. Center courses may be modified to provide degree credit for students enrolled in the BTSR program.

"Our purpose at BTSR is to serve the church, and this initiative will enable us to serve a new group of churches," said Graves. "We will be able to provide professional preparation to persons who are already serving in ministry but who seek further education."

The grant was part of \$53.4 million given to 45 theological schools across the United States and Canada by the Indianapolis-based endowment. The purpose of the grants is to increase theological schools' capacities to prepare good students to be fine ministers of congregations.

"We are deeply grateful to the Lilly Endowment for making this unique opportunity possible, and we anticipate the possibilities it opens to serve churches in a new way," said Graves.

Craig Dykstra, Lilly Endowment vice president for religion, said the grants are intended to "deepen and enrich the religious life of American Christians, primarily by helping to strengthen their churches." The grant programs will aid theological institutions to "make a strategic advance to improve their capacity to prepare the next generation of congregational or parish ministers," he said.

Lilly Endowment is a private foundation that follows the wishes of its founders by supporting the causes of religion, education and community development.

All 202 ATS-accredited theological schools in the U.S. and Canada were invited to apply for grants in the program.

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-- By ABP staff. Based on reporting by Beth McMahon and Robert Dilday.

Georgia Baptist congregation opposes stance against gays

DECATUR, Ga. (ABP) -- A Baptist church in suburban Atlanta long known for its openness to gays has adopted a statement opposing a new Georgia Baptist Convention constitutional amendment allowing exclusion of churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual activity."

In a statement adopted unanimously in a church business meeting Nov. 11, members of Oakhurst Baptist Church said the measure adopted at the convention's recent annual meeting was based on a one-sided view of the Bible's teaching on homosexuality.

The church in Decatur, Ga., known in the past for its strong emphasis on social ministry, amended its church covenant two years ago to welcome people regardless of sexual orientation. While Oakhurst was not mentioned by name during debate over the new constitutional amendment, it was widely viewed as one of a small number of Georgia Baptist congregations most likely to be affected by the provision.

"We have experienced this as one of the most difficult and volatile issues Christians face, and we recognize that the debate is a valid one in which strong differences exist on every level," said the church's statement, which was printed in full in the Dec. 3 issue of the Georgia Baptist newspaper, The Christian Index.

In their statement, Oakhurst members noted that Baptists have been wrong in the past when they believed the Bible supported racial segregation, slavery and the exclusion of women from ministry roles. Baptists today are in danger of making a similar mistake of "finding certainty where none exists" about the Bible's teaching on sexuality, they continued.

"Contrary to popular belief, sexual orientation is not a choice," the statement said. "Human sexuality is a gift of God to be accepted with gratitude and expressed responsibly." The statement said sex should be in the context of "caring, loving, committed, covenant relationships between monogamous adults."

"Believing that only one position has been heard, we challenge Georgia Baptists to undertake personally the study of the biblical/theological understandings of sexuality with an openness to all viewpoints," the statement said.

The statement also called on Georgia Baptists to support justice for all persons who are denied civil rights and to uphold historic Baptist principles of soul liberty and local-church autonomy. "We have not been a creedal people," it said. "We call on you to be true to being Baptists."

Meeting Nov. 16-17 in Columbus, messengers to the Georgia Baptist Convention adopted new language excluding as a "cooperating" church any congregation "which knowingly takes, or has taken, any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Another vote at the convention aimed at churches which practice charismatic worship fell short of a required two-thirds majority.

An editorial in the Dec. 3 Christian Index said there has been confusion in media reports about the anti-gay amendment.

"Contrary to what the secular papers said, Georgia Baptists did not issue an edict stating that homosexuals would not be welcome in Georgia Baptist churches," Index Editor William Neal wrote in a signed editorial. Local churches would have rebelled against such an action, he added.

"Baptists still believe you can love people, even when you are opposed to the sin in their lives," the editorial continued. "The amendment does not speak to the issue of local churches ministering to the gay community."

While some are concerned the new amendment poses a threat to local-church autonomy, Neal pointed out that the convention has always had the right to withdraw fellowship from a particular church.

According to convention rules, any messenger at an annual meeting can make a motion challenging the seating of messengers from a church. Neal said the new amendment could actually make it harder to force a vote on such a challenge, by kicking in a process allowing a church to respond to accusations and possibly reconcile differences, thus pre-empting a vote on the convention floor.

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-- By ABP staff

Glenn Hinson named editor of Review and Expositor

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia seminary professor Glenn Hinson has been named to a two-year post as editor of Review and Expositor, a scholarly theological journal supported by a consortium of moderate Baptist schools.

Hinson, now professor of spirituality, worship and church history at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Va., previously was editor of the journal when both he and Review and Expositor were affiliated with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

After the seminary's shift to a conservative focus drove Hinson and other moderate faculty members away, Review and Expositor also broke its ties with Southern Seminary. The journal is now affiliated with a consortium of new and emerging theological schools. The journal's primary sponsors are the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and remaining faculty at Southern Seminary who represent the historically moderate "Southern tradition."

Central Baptist Theological Seminary and the Gardner-Webb University Divinity School were the initial new patrons of the journal. Since the founding of the consortium, three other schools have signed on as patrons, said Dan Stiver, the journal's outgoing editor. Those schools are the Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Texas, Campbell University Divinity School in North Carolina and Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois.

Along with Hinson's new role as editor, the board of Review and Expositor has named as book-review editor David May, associate professor of New Testament at Central Seminary in Kansas City, Kan.

The journal's upcoming Winter 1999 issue will focus on E.Y. Mullins as a central figure in Baptist life. Authors include Hinson, James Dunn of the Baptist Joint Committee, Russell Dilday of Truett Seminary and current president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and Curtis Freeman of Houston Baptist University.

Stiver, who now teaches at Logsdon but previously taught at Southern Seminary, said the issue on Mullins is fitting for the Review and Expositor, a publication begun by Mullins, a theologian who was president of the Louisville seminary from 1899 to 1928.

"Participating in forming the new consortium was personally highly gratifying because it was the only bright spot for me in the takeover at Southern, with the loss of so much of the Southern tradition and the Southern faculty and my own place at Southern," Stiver said. "This journal, founded by Mullins early in the century, thus avoided becoming yet another casualty of the controversy and has re-emerged with renewed support and a bright future."

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Nashville Baptist university beneficiary of \$25 million gift

By Ian Campbell

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A friendship struck between two neighboring businessmen more than 50 years ago has paid off in the largest scholarship gift in the history of Belmont University, a Baptist-affiliated school in Nashville, Tenn.

The gift, which will eventually exceed \$25 million, is from the estate of Ed and Bernice Johnson, who once owned and operated a gas station across the street from the university. But this story has more to do with their proximity to another neighbor, potato-chip manufacturer Herman Lay.

In 1939, the Johnsons opened their Esso station at the southwest corner of Belmont Boulevard and Portland Avenue. It was a logical place for Lay's company, located across Portland, to fill and service its delivery trucks before distributing Lay's potato chips and other snacks in the Nashville area.

Times were tough for Lay's fledgling business, and his credit account at Johnson's Esso was often the only thing that kept his trucks running. The business relationship turned into a personal friendship between the Johnsons and the Lays.

H.W. Lay and Company incorporated in 1948, and Lay offered his employees an opportunity to buy stock in the business. He extended the offer to the Johnsons, as well. Ed Johnson took the family savings and borrowed what he could to invest \$8,000.

Bernice Johnson "cried for more than a day," recalled Peggy Grow, the Johnsons' niece, who grew up around her aunt and uncle and cared for them during their final years. "This was their life savings, and she was not a risk taker. But my uncle believed in Herm Lay and as other investors sold their stock, he would buy it."

The company continued to grow and in 1961 merged with The Frito Company to become Frito-Lay, Inc. In 1965, the board of directors for Frito-Lay and the Pepsi-Cola Company announced the formation of PepsiCo, which today is a \$29 billion company and is ranked 31st in the 1998 Fortune 500.

The Johnsons sold their service station in 1955, breaking off regular contact with Belmont University. They became reacquainted in 1965, when they enlisted services of Lawrence Glover, a certified public accountant who taught at Belmont and was a member of Crieviewood Baptist Church.

Based on their strong relationship with Glover, the Johnsons in 1983 sent an unsolicited check for \$10,000 to the university.

"In 1983, we weren't receiving a large number of unsolicited donations, and certainly not in the amount of the Johnsons' gift," said Belmont President William Troutt. "So, I made a point of going to the Johnsons to thank them personally."

That meeting opened the door to an interest that eventually led to Belmont becoming a main beneficiary of the Johnson estate.

A few years after meeting with Troutt, the couple established the Lawrence Glover Accounting Scholarship to honor their longtime friend. While the Johnsons were reluctant to take credit for their generosity, they enjoyed meeting the students they were helping. Troutt held annual "Pepsi Parties" for recipients of the Glover scholarships, which the Johnsons attended as long as their health allowed.

In 1996, the school honored Bernice Johnson with its equivalent of an honorary doctorate. That same year, she established another scholarship for nursing.

Ed Johnson died Dec. 31, 1994. His wife died Jan. 26, 1998.

This year, Belmont received the first third of a gift from the Johnson estate, in which the university, McKendree Manor and the Salvation Honor are named as main beneficiaries. Belmont will receive the final two thirds of the gift in 10 years, when investments mature.

It is expected to total more than \$25 million, making it the largest scholarship gift ever received by Belmont University and one of the largest scholarship gifts to any college or university in the Southeast.

"The Johnsons' remarkable gift will make a Belmont education possible for countless numbers of deserving students in the days ahead," Troutt said.

"Our number one challenge is keeping Belmont affordable for Baptist families," he said. "Hopefully, the Johnsons' remarkable commitment to making Christian education available to deserving students will inspire others."