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**Asian Baptist seminary consortium
partners with Mercer, ends SBC ties**

By Bob Allen

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Mercer University has announced establishment of a new 15-year partnership with the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary. The move by the consortium of Baptist schools in nine Asian countries ends a 40-year relationship with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Under the arrangement announced by Mercer officials Aug. 13, the Macon, Ga.,-based university will provide financial support for the Asian seminary's administrative office and primary meetings. Mercer will also establish a scholarship fund to allow an Asian student to study at Mercer's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta or another university program every three years.

The announcement did not disclose the dollar-amount of Mercer's support but said it would be implemented in three five-year phases.

Trustees of the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary approved the new partnership Aug. 11. The vote reportedly reflects a growing desire to have the direction of the school determined by Asians and not by Western missionary organizations that provide funding. It also represents dissatisfaction with policies of the Richmond, Va.,-based International Mission Board, which Asian critics say increasingly try to dictate theology and administrative practices from the United States.

The trustee vote changed the seminary's constitution by replacing a reference to "sponsorship" by the IMB with "partnership" with Mercer, a symbolically significant change.

The Asian Baptist seminary's president, Chow Lien Hwa, said in a statement the new partnership would generate ministry opportunities for both parties and give the Asian seminary the financial security it needs.

"I am happy about the resolution of the board of trustees of the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary to form a partnership with Mercer University," Chow said. He said the vote was "neither personal nor sentimental" but represents "the careful and prayerful deliberation" of the board of trustees.

The seminary, which is a consortium of nine national Baptist schools in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia, opened in 1960 with five students. For years the number of students remained small, between 50 and 100, but in recent years has grown to more than

250 graduate students from 15 different countries, Chow said. Six of the presidents of the nine national seminaries that comprise the consortium earned doctorates from ABGTS.

Graham Walker, who has been academic dean of the Asian school since 1993, recently resigned as an International Mission Board missionary in the Philippines to join Mercer's faculty as a professor of theology, effective July 1. Walker, who grew up as a missionary child in Singapore, will serve as the university's liaison for the partnership.

Walker said the partnership with Mercer would help the Asian seminary capitalize on new opportunities for expansion amid the emergence of new self-supporting seminaries and missionary movements in East Asia. He said it also opens the door for nationals to serve as the seminary's dean and treasurer, which has been difficult because of what a press release termed its "paternal relationship with the International Mission Board."

The IMB responded to the partnership by announcing it will no longer provide funds and missionary personnel will not teach graduate-level course in the consortium, Baptist Press reported Aug. 17.

Eight IMB missionaries have carried doctoral-level teaching loads in ABGTS, while seven more have taught occasionally, according to the BP report, written by an IMB staff writer.

Don Dent, the board's regional leader for Southeast Asia and Oceania, said in a letter to consortium trustees that the IMB desired to continue its relationship with the Asian seminary. He warned, however, that the IMB would not work with Mercer because of theological views associated with the university's president, Kirby Godsey.

Conservatives accused Godsey of being a liberal after reading views in his 1996 book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest."

"If we were to officially partner with Mercer, we would either be stating that Dr. Godsey's theology is of no concern for us or that we believe the president has no influence over an institution," Dent warned. "We are unable to make either of those affirmations."

Avery Willis, senior vice president of overseas operations, said he and IMB President Jerry Rankin agree with the decision by regional leaders to withdraw from the consortium.

The Baptist Press story also said the IMB and Asian Baptist leaders had been involved in a 10-year program to phase down Asian seminary's dependence on missions support to run the school.

"We regret that what we had hoped would be an Asian solution for contextualized theological education turns out to be continued dependence on American financial support with a partner whose views are not in harmony with the Bible," said Willis, a former missionary to Indonesia.

Godsey said he believes the partnership will benefit both schools by cultivating contacts and relationships between Mercer and Asian Baptists. "We are always eager to partner with other Baptists who affirm and perpetuate our strong Baptist traditions, particularly in the arena of theological education," he said.

Mercer currently has similar sister relationships with 20 schools around the world.

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University of Mobile sells Latin American branch

MOBILE, Ala. (ABP) -- The Baptist-affiliated University of Mobile has found a buyer for its controversial Nicaraguan campus, officials have announced.

Opened in 1992, the branch campus in San Marcos, Nicaragua, was blamed for draining funds from the main campus in Alabama, leading to the termination of former President Michael Magnoli and placing the

school's accreditation at risk. Disagreement over the crisis also for a time strained relations between the university and its sponsoring Alabama Baptist State Convention.

A decision two years ago by current President Mark Foley to put the property up for sale prompted the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to remove the probationary status it had placed on the school.

Foley announced sale of the property July 31 to Ave Maria Institute, a small Catholic school in Ypsilanti, Mich. Officials did not disclose the sale price, but the Mobile Register reported it was several hundred thousand dollars.

The sale, which is expected to be finalized June 20, 2000, allows the University of Mobile to operate the school this year, but relieves the university of any financial liability. Domino Pizza founder Thomas Monaghan, who chairs the Ave Maria board, has agreed to personally underwrite any losses to UM from the Latin American campus this year, up to \$1 million, according to the Mobile Register.

The University of Mobile had planned to close the branch campus June 30, but Monaghan's pledge changed that, Foley said.

Foley told the Alabama Baptist the deal was "an answer to prayer." He said the agreement ensures the campus will continue to provide Christian higher education in Nicaragua, while making it easier for the University of Mobile to leave the country.

The Mobile Register also reported that Ave Maria Institute, a 58-student college started last year by a number of Catholic lay people, could take over the Nicaragua campus earlier than next year if its accreditation is approved sooner than expected.

Foley said the university will not recover all of the approximately \$2 million it was attempting to return from Nicaragua to the main campus. But he said the deal accomplished three goals set by the trustees last year -- to withdraw from Nicaragua by June 30, 2000, to find a successor institution to operate the campus and to recover as much money as possible.

"Any one of the goals alone could be accomplished with some degree of ease," Foley said. "Bundled together, they became a God-sized thing. Simply put, the Lord answered our prayers."

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-- By ABP staff

Frozen-yogurt magnate pledges \$4.5 million to Baptist university

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- Ouachita Baptist University will receive \$4.5 million from frozen-yogurt magnate Frank Hickingbotham, officials at the school in Arkadelphia, Ark., announced Aug. 12.

The pledge kicks off a \$10 million fund-raising campaign for the Hickingbotham School of Business at the 1,500-student university affiliated with the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. The fund-raising drive is slated to begin Sept. 1.

University President Andrew Westmoreland announced the gift from the Frank B. Hickingbotham Foundation and the Hickingbotham family at a news conference just before a meeting of the university's board of trustees in Little Rock.

Hickingbotham is chairman of the board and chief executive officer of TCBY, Inc., the world's largest manufacturer and franchiser of frozen yogurt. He will be honorary national chairman of the fund-raising campaign.

Hickingbotham attended Ouachita three semesters before transferring to what is now the University of Arkansas at Monticello. He said he values his Christian education and would like to see others have the same opportunity, according to a report in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. "We need more people with a Christian influence coming into business," he said at the news conference.

Hickingbotham founded TCBY Enterprises, Inc., in 1981. It has grown from a single frozen-yogurt store in Little Rock to a corporation with about 3,000 locations in the United States and 70 foreign countries, according to information on the company's Web site.

Proceeds from the five-year fund-raising campaign will be used for student scholarships, attracting and retaining faculty, updating computer equipment and the establishment of a distinguished-speaker series, said Phil Rice, dean of the business school.

Joe Franz, Ouachita's vice president for development, said the campaign has a basic goal of \$7.5 million and a challenge goal of \$10 million. He noted that proceeds in the campaign would be added to \$5.75 million that Hickingbotham and other donors have contributed toward endowment and capital structure of the business school in recent years.

"This campaign will not only increase the visibility of our outstanding business school, but the endowment funds will enable the program to grow even stronger in the future," Franz said.

Ouachita's business program was part of the 113-year-old university's school of arts and sciences before it became a separate school named after Hickingbotham in 1992. The business school has 12 faculty members and about 100 students. It offers degrees in accounting and business administration with emphases in economics, finance, information systems, management and marketing.

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-- By ABP staff

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